

The
LONE RANGER
10
CENTS

Aug.
Magazine



The
Cave of Terror

A Complete Novel

Featuring
The
LONE RANGER
with
TINTO
and
TONTO

also
Thrilling Short Stories
Articles - Departments
and Cartoons



The Lone Ranger
In
The Cave of Terror



Chapter I

The Hand of Fate

The gorge seemed to have been plowed straight through Catamount Mountain by some giant machine of nature. Sheer walls rose perpendicular from the banks of the small stream on the canyon's floor to a height of fifty odd feet. A crude bridge spanned the gap while occasional trees leaned over the edge as if to peer into the depths in curiosity.

Since noon, Lige Cooley had crouched in the grasses of the western side, clutching his long rifle in a gnarled fist, and dividing his attention, between the lengthening shadow of the rock behind which he waited, and the trail toward the east, beyond the bridge.-.

At times, his gaunt, weather-beaten face grew soft as the burning hatred in his mind was lulled by the melodic whisper of the breeze through leaves and grass. Then his mood would change. The reason for his being here would recur to him, and his mouth would become set and grim.

His white moustache would twitch in eagerness to blast leaden death at the figure that was due to ride across the bridge. He'd tug his battered hat a trifle tighter over his thin, white hair and his eyes would squint to sharpen the view of the trail that led from Redstone.

For five years, the desire to kill had simmered in Lige's broken heart while Deke Fenner did a term in the jail in Redstone. His was the patience of Job as he waited for Fenner's arrival. Five hours of waiting behind the red rock at the canyon's lip seemed as nothing compared to the five years of waiting that had passed. Yet, he was becoming restless.

Lige had never shot a man from ambush, in fact, he never in his sixty years



had shot to kill. But now he sincerely hoped and prayed that he would not fail in his grim purpose. The old man's only hope was that buck-fever would not freeze his finger, or faulty sight spoil his aim. He knew his first shot must bring down Fenner. There would be no time to reload and fire again if he should miss.

There was no fear of punishment in Cooley's mind. What the law did to him didn't matter. He felt justified. Deke Fenner had killed his son. Moreover, Fenner had shot Tom Cooley in the back, from ambush, giving the eighteen year old boy no chance to defend himself.

Lige knew, as did every man in town, that Fenner hated Tom. Tom, square-shouldered, honest, trusted by everyone and loved by Peggy Masters, stood between Deke Fenner and the Masters girl.

In his conceit, the tall and somewhat handsome Deke thought Peggy would give him her attentions were it not for Tom. Tom's easy smile goaded the burning jealousy in Fenner's mind to such a point that he waited in a coulee and then killed.

His shrewd scheme to fasten the blame on someone else failed, and he faced



trial. A groveling, panic-stricken wretch, shaking with fear and begging for mercy, he so impressed a sympathetic jury that five years was, deemed a fitting punishment.

There were members of the jury that actually doubted his guilt despite the stack of evidence against him. To avoid a disagreement and a new trial, a compromise verdict was arrived at.

The look of relief that crossed Deke's face at the announcement, was burned into the old man's very soul. Lige, unable to believe what he heard, had lived these past five years for only one purpose. The purpose that brought him to the canyon's rim today.

Word of Deke's release had gone ahead of him, and a few miles to the west, the town at the Forks was waiting to receive the man who had gotten away with murder.

"They won't git tuh, see the skunk," growled the old man. Leastwise, not alive."

He shifted his position to ease the cramped and aching muscles, and for the hundredth time examined his rifle. He glanced behind him and noted the blood-red sun just touching the horizon.

A look of worry crossed Cooley's face. Suppose after all, Deke did not return to the Forks. Suppose the advance information was in error. Were all these years of waiting for this day, to be for nothing. Lige did not fear death —only failure. He must get Deke, and get him with a single shot. Even Judge Masters, as fine a

man as ever lived, was disgusted with the trial. Lige remembered telling him that someday he would kill Deke Fenner. The judge had looked at him for a moment with a steady gaze from beneath shaggy eyebrows. He hadn't told Lige not to do it. He'd simply said, "Don't let the Sheriff catch you at it."

Lige wouldn't. At least, not until after it was done, and then nothing mattered, Tom would be avenged.

"Wonder where Judge Masters and Peggy went," thought Lige. Everybody wondered. The Judge and Peggy left the Forks soon after the trial of Deke Fenner. They told no one where they were going. Many rumors were connected with their disappearance, but these were so varied that no credence could be given any of them.

Thoughts of Judge and Peggy Masters were swept from Cooley's mind by the sound of hoof beats on the hard-packed earth beyond the canyon. Lige swallowed hard, and felt the pressure of his blood pound in his throat with each heartbeat. His hands were trembling.

He poked the rifle out beyond the rock, rested it, then tried to hold it steady. The hoofs sounded nearer. The horseman could not "be far beyond the bend ... in just a moment now Lige forced himself to hold steady.

The last rays of the sun lighted the rider of a chestnut mare that swung around the bend toward the bridge. Deke Fenner, though white-faced with prison pallor, was still a handsome man. His black hair was fashioned in sideburns which showed beneath a brand new stetson. His moustache was a neat, waxed, outline of black against his skin.

Lige noted the same old conceit in Fenner's manner. Five years had not changed him. The long rifle steadied. At last the time to get this man, was at hand,

He poked the rifle out beyond the rock, rested it, then tried to hold it steady.,

He rested His right cheek against the walnut stock of the rifle and squinted over the sights. The bead centered on the patch of blue shirt that showed between the edges of Deke's open vest.

The chestnut's hoofs clattered on the narrow wooden bridge.

"Now," thought Lige. The hammer of his rifle rose . .

The hammer, then fell.

A dull click sounded as the hammer fell on a faulty shell. To Lige, this click was the sound of doom. A hurried glance toward his gun, then his eyes went back to Fenner on the chestnut mare.

Deke's ears were keen. He heard the metallic click above the horse's hoofs. His black eyes caught the glint of Lige's rifle, and he saw the old man's face—saw him working frantically to replace the shell with a fresh one.

Black rage and hatred distorted Fenner's face. In a flash, he understood Cooley's purpose. He snatched a gun from his side.

The old man, almost entirely concealed by the rock, made a hard target, but Deke could fire-six shots before Lige could reload.

Deke aimed the first one hurriedly. The bullet pinged against the rock, showering Lige with flying chips.,

Things happened fast. The chestnut was a nervous horse, barely broken to the saddle; a high-strung beast, unused to gunfire. When Deke's gun roared close to the animal's ear, the horse reared in fright.

The action was so sudden that Deke had to make a frantic grab for the pommel to hold his seat. He let go of his gun, and it fell, to strike the flimsy railing of the bridge and fall into the canyon beneath.

The big mare pitched violently, its rider bouncing and swaying in the saddle.



Shrill cries from Deke only added to the chestnut's terror.

Lige opened his eyes in wonderment at the sight. A miracle, it seemed, had saved his life. He saw Deke forget all principles of horsemanship. Panic-stricken, lest he be tossed over the edge of the narrow bridge, he flung his arms around the horse's neck and clung there for dear life.

Forgetting his hatred for the man, forgetting that but half-a-minute before he had tried to kill Deke Fenner, Lige dropped his rifle and raced for the bridge.

The horse leaped to land stiff-legged with back arched. Then it sunfished and one foot came precariously near the edge of the bridge. The strangling grip of Deke was adding blind fury to the mare's stark panic. It became a devil on four legs—a bucking, lashing, rearing demon of plunging hoofs.

Lige grabbed for the dangling reins, and missed. To the credit of old Lige, let it be said that he sincerely tried to save Deke Fenner from the awful plunge into the canyon. He made another frantic reach for the bridle, yelling to Deke, "Git yer feet back in the stirrups, he screamed above the clatter, "hang on, I'll calm the critter."

Dazed and stunned by the terrible jolting, Deke barely heard the old man's voice,

Lige found the reins and strained to bring the horse to solid ground beyond the bridge. "Steady, old gal—yore, all right—now take it easy."

But the mare would not heed. Angered further by the new restraint, the horse reared high, and Deke's grip on the neck was broken. He fell back as the chestnut stood on hind legs with the forefeet pawing at air—over Lige's head.

Lige looked beyond the horse as he stepped aside to dodge the lashing hoofs. He saw Deke leave the saddle and half roll over the horse's rump, strike the rail, then crash down to the pine-boards of the bridge itself. His hip hit the edge of the bridge, and Lige made a frantic dive to save the man, but too late.

With a last scream of frenzy, Deke Fenner fell into the void, Lige saw him turn over twice in the air, then strike the rocks below.

Cooley felt a wave of nausea sweep over him as he heard the sickening thud rise from the canyon's floor. He knew there was no life left in Deke Fenner. The man who killed his son was dead, but not by his hand.

For half an hour Lige sat there on the bridge, His booted feet dangling over the edge. The broken bridge, the riderless horse, which had gone on toward the Forks alone, and the body lying half in and half out of the stream of water down below, would tell their story.

Finally old Lige rose to his feet.

He picked up the rifle that had failed him, then started on foot, back to the Forks.

CHAPTER II

The **Masked** Rider

THE stream in the canyon was but a remnant of the mighty river that had flowed

here in ages past. The water was barely six feet across and only inches deep as it washed over the smooth, flat rocks. Between each side of the stream, and the base of each of the towering cliffs, a stretch of sandy, rock-strewn terrain gave uncertain footing to the white stallions on which two rode.

Empty silence hung over the deep gorge like an ominous and threatening cloud. A short time before, the air had been shattered by the blast of a heavy guns and the frantic pounding of a badly frightened horse on a wooden bridge. The shrill screams of a man augmented the tattoo of hoofs, Then silence.

The taller of the men was masked. That part of his face which showed beneath the black domino was clean-shaved and well-shaped. A firm chin, and an even mouth, gave one the impression that the rest of the face might reflect great character, a powerful force and a strong personality. The steely-grey eyes that studied the trail through the slits of the mask could become warm with sympathetic understanding, or chilled as blue ice, as the case might be. The Lone Ranger was as sincere a friend to the law-abiding pioneers as he was a ruthless enemy of the lawless.

The past work of this masked rider made outlaws quake in fear at the mention of his coming. Others had cause to pray to Heaven for the safety and security of the man who had aided them in time of need. Known only as the Lone Ranger, his deeds had made his ringing cry of "Heigh Yo, Silver!" known throughout the West.

The Lone Ranger was an almost legendary character to most people. No one had seen his unmasked face and no one knew his name unless, perhaps, it might have been his faithful companion, a Pottawatomie Indian, named Tonto,. And Tonto, if he knew, would never tell.

In every way Tonto was like his Indian brothers, except in the expression of



his face. It was a more intelligent face, a more tolerant expression than other red men possessed. His long association with the masked rider had given him a Character that combined the best features of both red men and white.

No man was Tonto's equal at following a track, or reading trail signs. Few men had a better grasp of the habits of nature and her creatures. In combat, the Indian was a tower of strength.

The two had been riding in silence. Tonto, a half a pace behind the masked man, finally spoke, "Bridge up there."

The Lone Ranger looked upwards and saw the narrow span that joined the two sides of the canyon, about a hundred yards ahead. His eyes narrowed slightly behind the mask as he saw a broken section of the slender, railing.

"The hoofs we heard must have been on that bridge," he mused. "I can't think of anything else that would make a sound like that under a horse." His eyes lowered to follow the stream that was indistinct in the gathering gloom. He fully expected to find the body of a man or horse, or both, at the bottom of the ravine near the bridge. The broken railing was further evidence that this reasoning might prove correct.

The Lone Ranger fell back to draw up beside his friend. "There is the man," he said.

His fingers pointed needlessly, for Tonto had already seen the figure beneath the bridge. A man's body was sprawled in a grotesque position. The hips rested on the stream's bank, head and shoulders under water, and booted feet on dry ground. If the fall hadn't killed him, he would have drowned.

The riders came close and dismounted. The masked man stepped into the water and hauled the body on dry ground.

Darkness had almost fallen. "We'll need a little fire for light," the Lone Ranger told his Indian companion.

While Tonto built a fire, the Lone Ranger searched on the rocks nearby for a gun to fit the dead man's empty holster. Finally he saw it on the bottom of the stream not far from where the body had landed. As he secured the heavy weapon a puzzled look came into his face.

The dead man didn't have the appearance of a westerner, yet this gun was one that no man from the East would use. The trigger had been removed and the weapon fixed for "fanning." Only a quick-shooter, a man who had been reared with a gun in his hand would use this kind of weapon.

The Lone Ranger saw that of the six cartridges, two had been exploded. "Two," he thought he had heard only one. Then recalling the custom of many gunmen, he removed the shells that had been scored by the firing pin, and examined them closer by the light of the fire.

One shell, he saw, was heavily corroded—the other had been fired more recently. "Carried a dead one under the hammer," he decided. "It's been some time since he fired the gun, until today."

The fire was blazing high, not far from the dead body. By its flickering light,

the masked man began exploring the dead man's pockets. He brushed aside a dirty bit of folded paper to reach for a wallet. He didn't suspect that this paper would start him on the most dangerous adventure of his entire life. An adventure in a dread cavern where death was a daily routine.

The wallet held some money — nothing more. There was no clue to the man's identity in the leather billfold.

Tonto watched from where he sat on his heels, feeding fresh wood to the fire. The Indian's face was without expression of any sort despite the curiosity within his mind. The wallet was laid aside and a formal looking paper came next for inspection. Blank spaces had been filled in with flourishing handwriting. It was a discharge from prison. The deep, soft voice of the Lone Ranger said, "His name was Deke Fenner, Tonto."

"Fenner," echoed the Indian.

"He served five years in prison for murder. The man he killed was named Tom Cooley. Last week he was released and it looks as if he was on his way back to the Forks where he was tried."

The red man nodded.

"There is no sign of wound on him," continued the Lone Ranger, "and we heard only one shot. I'd say off-hand, he saw someone he considered as an enemy. Being a gunman, he drew and fired. His horse must have become frightened and threw him off the bridge."

The explanation seemed quite logical. It would do, at any rate, where was no evidence of murder. "We will try and find his relatives, if he has any, and turn his money over to them." As he spoke, the masked man was poking through the remaining articles. Again his finger brushed the little square of dirty paper. He picked it up, unfolded it, and then held it nearer to the light.

The writing was crude, and the spelling poor. As he read, the tall man in the mask spoke several words aloud. "Tex Wilson—Catamount Cave—Judge Masters—" His face grew stern, and he read the note through twice, before he put it down.

A full moment of silence was broken only by the crackling of the dry wood in the fire. Tonto leaned forward and added a few heavier chunks, waiting for his companion to speak. "Tex Wilson," repeated the Ranger, "he was in the jail at Redstone a few years ago. He was there for the first two years of Deke Fenner's term."

The name recalled things to Tonto's mind. "Him outlaw," he said. "Him rob-um stage coach, steal-um gold."

"That's what he went to jail for, in wants Deke Fenner to join at Catamount Cave. He says in this note that there's an organization that has been built up by Judge Masters, that will make a million dollars for every man in the gang. Judge Masters is the man who sentenced Deke to jail."

"Masters disappear," the Indian offered.

"Yes, and it seems the Judge has turned to crime."

"Catamount Cave' plenty bad place."

The masked man nodded. Few people knew of the existence of the giant cavern. Of those who found it, and sought to explore its depths, some had lost their way in the miles of confusing tunnels, and perished.

BOTH Tonto and the Lone Ranger had been in Catamount Cave, but it was years since their last visit. Its entrance was almost-concealed by valley foliage at the base of Catamount Mountain. In the years gone by, some prospectors had roamed the mountain, but failing to find ore of value, had abandoned it for riper fields.

"There is one thing in the note, Tonto, that is most interesting,"

"What that!"

"Tex Wilson advises Fenner to bring this note with him to identify him in case he doesn't remember Fenner. That means that the two are not particularly well acquainted. Probably they seldom saw each other in the prison. They could have developed a friendship by talking through the walls of their cells."

Tonto sensed that a daring plan was forming in the masked man's mind. He studied the masked figure, watching every change of expression in the lips of the Lone Ranger. According to the note, a crime was being planned. Crime of gigantic order that had taken years of preparation. Crime that would bring such rich returns that even the honorable and respected Judge Masters was interested in it. Crime, in fact, of Judge Masters' planning.

Finally the masked man rose to his feet. His lips pursed in a soft whistle and from out of the shadows beyond the circle of firelight, a big white stallion trotted to his side.

"I can reach Catamount Cave by midnight, Tonto. Wait in our camp two days before you try to join me. You'd better give this man a burial as best you can. Hold his property until I see you again. I'm going to become Deke Fenner."

As he spoke, the masked man was fumbling in his saddle-bag. He brought out small bottles of peculiar liquid and placed them near the fire. Then he found a small mirror and a pair of scissors. He sat down on the ground and propped the mirror against a stone. The fire lit his face as he looked into the glow. Then the long-fingered hands of the masked man reached for the strings of the mask, and loosened the knot. He sat, unmasked. His face was younger than one would believe. His cheeks were flat and

firm and fine sensitive eyebrows topped the deep set understanding eyes.

From one of the bottles, he poured a little liquid that Tonto had prepared by stewing certain berries. He smeared it over his palms, then rubbed his face vigorously. The brown tan, disappeared and his skin took on a lighter hue. The liquid dried almost at once, and covered the deep tan with a prison pallor.

Then, with the scissors, he cut a lock of the dead man's dark hair. From another of the bottles he pulled the cork and dipped his finger into the thick, gummy liquid, and spread it lightly over certain parts of his face.'

He worked speedily, fastening bits of hair to his mouth and the sides of his face. It stuck instantly. Then after a moment's study of the dead man's face, he carefully trimmed the hair until duplicated Deke Fenner's sideburns and moustache. To a not critical inspector, he might as pass as Deke Fanner,

Judge Masters might remember him," he thought aloud, "but I'll try and not let the Judge too close a look at me."

Tonto stood, holding his tall friend's hat ready for him. "You come back soon?" he asked, there was a plea in his voice.

"If I'm not back in two days, Tonto, use your own good judgement."

The red man nodded. The Ranger took his hat, and vaulted to the saddle. His voice was lifted in a cry that rang and echoed in the canyon. "Heigh Yo, Silver." The big stallion was away like a flash of fire, even before the man settled in the saddle for the trip to Catamount Cave, and the mystery it held.

CHAPTER III

Catamont Cave

THE twenty-odd men in the lantern lighted cave were for the most part, asleep, but some few still shuffled and dealt cards,



when from outside there came the sound of hoofs and a shouted command from the guards. Those who slept, wakened, and the card players tossed away their cards. All looked up with tense expectancy at the arrival of the newcomer. These men represented a strange collection of criminal types. Their evil natures were reflected in the hard and ruthless faces, and their eyes stared toward the cavern's yawning entrance and the black night beyond.

Some of the outlaws were the killer breed, with small, close-set and cold, unblinking eyes. Others were the sneak-thief type, with shifty eyes and loose-lipped mouths. There was hardly a man among them whose gun did not carry notches as boasting evidence of ruthless killing. They were an evil lot. It would seem that no one man on earth could control these men and keep keep absolute submission. Yet one man had. Strangest of all, a man whom they didn't see, but one whose orders came from the black tunnels that radiated from the big underground room in Catamount Mountain.

The yellow glow from a dozen oil lamps reflected from the greasy faces of men, and the slimy wall of the cave. For a moment, the only sound was the dripping of water from the wall on the south side into a

sort of trough that had been scooped out in the floor.

Two men came through the entrance, one of them leading a big, white stallion. The tall man was broad-shouldered and lean-hipped, and he moved with an easy grace that seemed to denote perfect co-ordination of mind and muscle, and perfect health despite the prison pallor in his face..

The one who had led the way was bent almost double by a deformed spine. His face was the embodiment of all that was evil. It was heavily pitted by small-pox, and a poorly healed knife gash on the right cheek drew his mouth back in a permanent sneer. The right sleeve of the creature's dirty, yellow shirt hung empty from the shoulder. His right hand seldom left a close proximity to the gun at his side,

He stood for a moment looking at the silent men before him, then he spoke in a thin, high-pitched voice. "This is Deke Fenner, the man we been waitin' for. Now you've seen him, you can go back to where you was."

The men said nothing, but gave no indication of returning to their sleep or poker. Frank animosity showed in their expressions, and more than one of them gave the man a glowering look of absolute hatred.

The deformed creature moved to one side of the cave where there were quite a number of horses tethered to a long pole, and gestured for the other to bring his horse.

"My name's Blinky," he explained, in the same voice he had used when addressing all the men. "I'm the only one that knows his way around here, except the boss. I'm the one that gives out the boss's orders, and you'll get the same sort of lesson Tex Wilson got if you don't obey them."

Tex Wilson — the tall man knew of him. He was not the same kind of outlaw these others were. Tex was a bad man, but a

brave one. He had carried on his bold banditry alone, and never had been known to kill wantonly for the sadistic pleasure of killing, as those in the cavern might have done. What sort of lesson had Tex Wilson been taught? It was Tex who had written the note that reposed in the pocket of the Lone Ranger,

While these thoughts went through the tall man's mind, Blinky gestured to the nearest of the men and ordered him to unsaddle the white horse.

Silver moved away from the touch of the stranger, but a restraining hand of the Lone Ranger made the big horse docile and willing to submit to the attentions of someone other than its master.

The man grumbled beneath his breath. "Fine sort of thing me bein' nurse to the horse of a stranger."

Though Blinky had started toward one of the divergent tunnels and was a full ten feet away, he caught the words of the gaunt-faced outlaw and whirled fast, despite his deformity.

"So that's it, eh! You don't like workin' fer the boss! So that's it, eh, Batdorf!"

"I never said that, Blinky," pleaded the man called Batdorf.

"I heard what you said—I ain't deaf. You don't like bein' nursemaid to a horse, eh. Maybe the boss will be glad to hear that you don't like the way he does things. Maybe the boss will treat you like he treated Tex Wilson. Maybe he'll invite you to see some of the other tunnels in old Cantamount"

He cackled noisily in a mirthless laugh, and wild fear shone in Batdorf's close-set eyes. "Don't tell him, Blinky," he pleaded. "In the name of heaven—don't tell the boss I said anything."

"I'll see about it," returned Blinky. "I'm goin' to see the boss right now an' find out if he wants to talk to Fenner. I'll think over what you said."



He grabbed one of the lanterns from a crude table and the flame faded to a dull glow around the first bend in the tunnel, then faded out entirely.

Batdorf was heavy-jowled and stupid looking. His huge, thick fingers moved clumsily, uncinching the saddle. For a moment he pawed the saddle bags curiously, and the Lone Ranger wished he'd left that bag back in the camp with Tonto. It held the materials that made up his disguise, and

several other things that would arouse suspicion in any one who saw them.

He felt relieved when the broad-faced, Batdorf finally threw the saddle over a peg without expressing any desire to open the bag. There seemed nothing to do until Blinky returned, so he sat down on a nearby box and studied his surroundings.

THE cavern was a big room at least one hundred feet across and nearly as wide. The ceiling at the center was twenty-five or more feet high and rounded gradually to meet the walls.

The water, dripping from the wall opposite that at which the horses stood, was caught in a trough. Tin cups indicated that it was fit to drink. Crude tables had been made from logs, and upended powder kegs and flour barrels served as seats.

At each side of the ten foot entrance there were wooden racks of carefully stacked rifles, and an almost inexhaustible supply of ammunition. At the back wall of the cavern, black holes gaped. Six of them, each one the mouth of a tunnel that led endlessly deep into the heart of the mountain. Each of these, the Lone Ranger knew, had branches and cross tunnels that were so confusing that many men who had explored them had been lost in the hopeless labyrinth, and died there. Years before, with Tonto, the Lone Ranger had visited this cave, had carefully explored some the tunnels but had not reached the end of any of them. At that time, the big room that served as vestibule, had been devoid of life or any sign of habitation. Not even bats were to be found here. Now it had become a headquarters—a home, in fact, for some of the most notorious killers the West had known.

The tall man realized that in coming here, he had undertaken a task that grew more hopeless all the time. Judge Masters had collected the most sought for outlaws

and assembled them here to take his orders in some gigantic scheme. What chance would one man have against this convention of criminals?

Batdorf finished his assignment and began to go back to his blankets when the Lone Ranger halted him. He paused and glared at the man who gripped his arm.

"Well," he murmured.

"Where, is Tex Wilson!" asked the tall man.

"Dunno," grunted Batdorf.

"Did he come here?"

The other nodded slowly. "He come, but that don't say he'll leave. Folks don't get outen this outfit when they once get in, and it ain't good sense to try and get out. Now leggo my arm."

The Lone Ranger dropped his hand, but His voice held the outlaw. "Just a minute, I want to ask you something else."

Batdorf hesitated, squinting in the pale face of the Lone Ranger. Distrust and suspicion were apparent in his easily-read face. He rubbed a finger against the side of his flat, broad nose.

"Does the Boss tell you of his plans!" asked the Lone Ranger.

Batdorf nodded slowly. "He told us, Fenner," he muttered. "an' you may as well know how we feel about your comin' here. You ain't no better'n any of the rest of us, an' you ain't entitled to no more profits from the game than we-uns,"

So the men resented Fenner. Judge Masters must have told them that Fenner was to have a place in the gang superior to the men in the big room. Unquestionably the real Deke Fenner had been much smarter, keener mentally, than the dull-faced, slow-witted men who knew little except killing. Tex Wilson, too, was a higher type of man,

THE organization became apparent to the Lone Ranger. Killers for the strong-arm work. Fenner and Wilson for the executive detail, Blinky as a general handy



man, and the Judge, the mastermind behind it all. But Wilson had tried to get out of it! What scheme could be repugnant to him! What plot so foul, that even a fortune couldn't tempt the bandit to" enter into it!

"What happened to Tex?" the tall man asked.

"I ain't tellin' you no more," growled Batdorf. "I said too much already." He ran his fingers through close cropped coarse hair. "The Boss don't like fer us tuh talk."

"What's the difference, we're all working together!"

"He don't take no chances with newcomers. There's one man that might come here somehow, an' get in amongst us to make a try to find out about our game. The Boss don'ttake no man in till he's made sure he's the right man."

"The right man!"

"Yeah," went on Batdorf. "Blinky told us about how the Boss is afraid his plan'll leak out and the Lone Ranger'll hear of it and try to come here."

The only reaction of the tall who had the face of Deke Fenner was a practically unnoticeable tightening of the lips. It was only for an instant, then he forced himself to relax. "The Lone Ranger?" he queried.

"Um." For a moment an eager look came into Batdorf's face. "I wish he would come here. I'd give a lot to see how *he'd* get treated What Tex Wilson got wouldn't be nothin' compared to what the Lone Ranger'd get if the Boss ever found him snoopin' around here." He chuckled softly. "It'd be a - sight to see."

Further questioning was cut off by the returning glow of Blinky's lantern in one of the tunnels. Batdorf left the tall man and went hurriedly to his blanket. The Lone Ranger fancied he saw a look of relief in several of the faces when Batdorf got back to his place. These men seemed united in a common fear of the punishment of the Boss and the threats of Blinky. Looking neither to right nor left, Blinky came straight to the tall man. He put his lantern on a nearby table so the light shone full in the pallid face with its black moustache. Then his one hand fingered at his gun. For several seconds he stood staring, studying and appraising. Then he spoke. "Nice horse you got." It was a mere statement, neither compliment nor friendly gesture. The tall man nodded agreement. "You seem pretty well acquainted with it. How long you had it!"

"I get acquainted quickly— with either horse or man," evaded the Lone Ranger.

"Only got out of jail a few days back, didn't you?" Blinky never varied the volume of his voice. It was a quick, clipped style of talk in a shrill, unpleasant pitch. In it was the constant sneer of his distorted lips. When the Lone Ranger agreed that he had recently left jail, Blinky drove another question at him.

"You ever heard of the Lone Ranger!"

"Yes, I've heard of Him."

"They say he's got a white stallion, something like that one of yours."

"So I've heard." The voice of the Lone Ranger was calm, and even, but he was inwardly condemning himself for not having taken another horse when he came here in the role of Deke Fenner. He was glad his six-guns hadn't been taken from him. He still wore two of them that could leap to action if the need arose. Perhaps in this extreme need, he would be justified in shooting—not to wound, but to kill. He wondered if he would.

After an ominous pause, Blinky moved a little nearer Silver. "Yes, sir," he said. "A horse just about like yours."

Then suddenly, His voice changed. It was a shout and a command, directed at, the big, white stallion. The Lone Ranger froze, and for a moment his heart pounded at his chest. Blinky shouted, "Heigh-Yo, Silver!" The big horse showed no sign of comprehension. Silver moved His head slowly in the direction of the one who shouted, and seemed merely curious at the strange looking creature who yelled at Him. Then he turned back to face the wall. Several of the other horses did the same.

The Lone Ranger relaxed. "God bless you, Silver," he thought,

Blinky grinned at the tall man. "O.K.," he said, "We don't take no chances here. I've got orders to show you Tex "Wilson, then you talk to the boss. Follow me."

He poked his hand through the lantern's handle and hooked it with his elbow. Thus he was able to carry it, and still keep His hand ready, near his gun. The Lone Ranger followed Blinky into a different tunnel than he'd entered before—to see. Tex. Wilson.

CHAPTER IV Torture Chamber

THE Lone Ranger hoped the dampness of the underground passageways wouldn't affect the gummy substance that held his false moustache and sideburns in place. With these, he had so far been able to play the part, of Deke Fenner, but the crucial test was yet to come.

Would Judge Masters, the only man who knew Deke Fenner, aside from Tex Wilson, see through the disguise? That remained to be seen. The tall man was anxious to see the Judge; find out why the jurist had allied himself with such a band of criminals.

The tunnel through which the mystery rider followed Blinky sloped steadily downward. The floor was moist in places from the water that seeped out of the stratified rock of the walls. At places the passage narrowed so the walls brushed the Lone Ranger's shoulders. They were slimy, and repugnant to his touch.

The pock-marked man was about ten feet ahead, lighting the way with his lantern. Outlined against the light, his twisted figure, floppy hat, and ratty long hair made a weird silhouette. He seemed to have no trouble keeping his footing on the slanting, slippery, shale-covered floor of the tunnel, than did the more sure-footed Lone Ranger.

The Lone Ranger kept close to the wall on his left. In his hand he held his clasp knife open, and at regular intervals jabbed in against the hard rock. He dared not scrape, the rasping sound might attract Blinky's attention. He hoped desperately that the jabs would make some slight mark to blaze the trail. Several times in a quarter-hour of steady travel, Blinky made an abrupt right-angle turn in the labyrinth when it seemed that the right course, if he wanted to follow the main tunnel, would have been straight ahead.

No markers, blazes or pointers were visible to the Lone Ranger. He wondered how any one could possibly remember his way in these dark passageways that had already taken a toll of lives..

Since leaving the combined living-quarters and stable of the gang, no word had been exchanged between the Lone Ranger and his guide. The only sound was the crunch of crumbled rock beneath their feet, and the gentle drip of an occasional bit of water.

Finally, Blinky's unpleasant voice cackled in merriment. "You couldn't find your way out of here in a million years," he said, "Unless I took you. I'm the only one."

He added, "Beside the boss, I'm the only one that knows the way around."

"By the Boss," asked the Lone Ranger, "you mean Judge Masters?"

"I ain't tellin' nothin'. Any thing you want to know, you ask the Boss. Maybe he'll tell you, maybe he won't. I ain't sayin' a thing."

"You can tell me how soon we'll reach Tex Wilson, can't you?"

"Soon enough." Blinky spoke without turning his head. For some time the Lone Ranger had been studying the outline of his figure. There was something about it that didn't ring true. Something that his plainly marked deformities didn't account for. Some vague thing kept recurring in the mystery rider's mind, but he couldn't determine just what there was about Blinky. Something, he was certain.

Suddenly the cripple stopped. The tunnel ended in a dead end against a rocky wall. He lowered the lamp to the floor and turned to face the Lone Ranger in obvious amusement at something.

"Now you'll see him, he chuckled. "Now you'll see the man that didn't like the Boss' game!"

ON THE right side of the tunnel, near the ground, there was a small opening.



It looked to be a hand-made hole cut through the rock to connect this tunnel with another place beyond. There was a glow of light coming from the other side of the three foot arch. "Crawl through there," ordered Blinky.

The tall man hesitated, he knew from his previous visit to the mountain and its honeycomb of tunnels, that deep holes were to be found in unexpected places. It struck him as suspicious that Blinky, for the first time, was instructing him to go ahead. Yet, if his death had been desired, there were plenty of opportunities without resorting to a trap of this sort.

"Well," growled Blinky impatiently, "What're you waitin' for! Afraid of gettin' dirty! Get down on your hands and knees and crawl."

The Lone Ranger had no choice but to obey. To refuse, or to resent the other's manner, would certainly undo all that might

still be accomplished in smashing a crime cult of untold power. He bent down and looked through the opening. The floor seemed solid. The place beyond was lighted by a single lantern standing on the shale-covered floor. His big stetson brushed the edges of the opening as the Lone Ranger crawled through. He reached the other side and stood. A soft moan reached his ears,

Blinky, struggling through the opening behind the tall man, chuckled at the sound. In the center of the large room, the gaunt, cadaverous figure of a man was spread-eagled face up, on the ground. His arms and legs were tautly stretched and fastened by rawhide thongs to iron stakes driven in the solid rock.

A week's stubble of beard covered the pain-wracked face, and there was a half-mad look in the sunken eyes. Bloodless lips moved slowly, as the man on the ground saw the Lone Ranger.

"D-Deke," he stahimered, "F-for God's sake . . . h-help."

A dirty, heavy tarpaulin was thrown across Tex Wilson's chest and stomach. His feet were bare, and like his hands, were dead white, due to cut-off circulation. A weaker man than Tex would have gone raving mad with pain. The Lone Ranger admired him. He was an outlaw, true, but he was; a brave man. Blinky brushed past the tall man, and spoke to Tex in mock concern, "Well, Wilson, how d'you feel now!" He cackled in amusement; "Guess you've had time to think over what you said to the Boss eh! Maybe you won't be so free; and easy with your tongue the next time, if there is a next time. He turned to the Lone Ranger. "This crittur listened to the whole plan, and then he said he wouldn't have no part of it."

Tex tried to speak, but Blinky! wouldn't be interrupted. "Thought! we'd turn him out and take the chance of him spoilin'

the whole scheme! Well, we don't let no one leave once we take them in."

RECOLLEeTION of Wilson's defiance seemed to infuriate the cripple. He reached forward and with his one hand, dragged away the tarpaulin. Tex winced in pain as the heavy fabric rasped across his body. He was stripped above the waist. Great red welt glared angrily on his chest and stomach—raw, open cuts that had been made with a lash. The quirt that made them lay on the ground near the lantern.

"You see," Blinky gloated, "This was the Boss' idea of punishment. Wilson gets a couple licks a day. Then the canvas is over him. He can't move enough to shake it off and every time he breathes, it rubs against the sore spots."

Every fibre of the Lone Ranger's being writhed in loathing at this inhuman torture. Tex Wilson would welcome a merciful bullet that would end his suffering. His eyes looked at the tall man pitifully, asking for a sudden death. Lone Ranger saw Tex study the six-guns wistfully. Words were needless.

The voice of the man who posed as Fenner snapped a crisp commmand. "Cut that man loose." He was hardly aware that he had spoken. Blinky stared in frank surprise.

"Wha-what's that!" the creature said.

Caution and good judgment dictated that the pain of Wilson be ignored, that everything be disregarded for the sake of getting to Judge Masters and learning full details of this vast plot, but there was a limit to the Lone Ranger's tolerance. "Cut him loose," he snapped again.

"Did you say to cut him loose?" asked the still unbelieving Blinky.

"I did." The tall man's hand flashed up from his side. He held his .44 steady on the pock-marked face. "This sort of thing isn't necessary in any organization. Not in one like this!"



The scar on Blinky's face grew livid with rage at the tall man's disregard for authority. "Hurry," snapped the Lone Ranger, "Or I'll do it for you, and if I do it."

He broke off with a significance that moved Blinky to obey.

As the ugly creature bent over Wilson, his back was toward the Lone Ranger, and again the mystery rider thought there was a strange distortion to the man's body that was not accounted for by the obvious deformities.

The look that came into Blinky's face would have puzzled the Lone Ranger, could he have seen it, just as it puzzled Wilson. It was a crafty, cunning look, that erased the fury of a moment past.

He squatted, drawing a knife from his belt and released Tex Wilson's feet. Then, without rising he sidled toward the shoulders. The rawhide was cut off the nearest wrist, then Blinky leaned far across Tex Wilson's body to reach the other.

The Lone Ranger watched each move with grim intensity. He wanted to give

the one-armed man no chance to suddenly plunge that knife into the heart of the man on the ground. A little gasp from Tex caught his attention. The captive sighed softly, and closed his eyes. Tex lapsed into unconsciousness. Blinky stood, and turned to the tall man. His look was one of resignation. "All right" he said, "You'll have to account to the Boss for that."

"I will," said the Lone Ranger. "'Where is he?"

Carrying the lantern, Blinky went to a far corner of the room, which was about a third the size of the first place in Catamount Cavern the Lone Ranger had seen. "Follow me," he said.

For the time, the Lone Ranger thought, it would be best to carry on. After talking to Judge Masters, he'd have a post of authority in the gang, then he could help Tex. Wilson would unquestionably prove a valuable ally to Him later on.

Blinky moved a few yards to, a corner of the chamber. For the first time the Lone Ranger noticed a ladder in the dim light of the lantern. The bottom of the ladder rested on the stone floor and the other end went through a hole some four feet in diameter.

"I leave you here," said Blinky. "Go up that ladder to the second level an' the Boss'll talk to you."

"How about a light!"

"You don't need no light. The Boss talks in the dark. Just go up to the top an' wait there and he'll speak to you when he gets ready." He was moving away as he spoke, and now he went backwards on hands and knees through the small opening beyond which his lantern still burned on the floor of the tunnel. With him, he took the lantern that had been in Tex Wilson's prison, leaving the place pitch dark.

The Lone Ranger felt the ladder with his hand. It seemed like ages ago since he'd first entered Catamount Cave, but scarcely

an hour could have elapsed. He listened, but heard no sign of consciousness from Tex. Despite the darkness, he felt that eyes were watching him, that people were aware of his every move, in fact his every thought.

No backing out now, he must go on. His foot found the first rung of the ladder. Then without further delay, the Lone Ranger climbed to the second level, to meet the boss.

CHAPTER V

Flight

WITH the sense of sight gone, four other senses took on a greater responsibility. The Lone Ranger, having reached the second level was listening intently for the slightest sound. He was surrounded by absolute darkness while he waited for Judge Masters, to announce himself.

This total lack of light was a thing he hadn't figured on. He thought his disguise and possession of the note sent by Tex Wilson to Deke Fenner, would so convince the boss of the gang that he was the man he appeared to be, that a slight difference in speech would go unnoticed. Now, however, there would be only his voice to carry out the deception, and his voice might not be a close match of Deke Fenner's.

He had never heard Fenner speak. To imitate his voice would be hopeless. He could only hope that in the years since the trial, the Judge might have forgotten what the killer sounded like. At any rate, the-tall man was not helpless. He still had his weapons, and their weight on his thighs was comforting. He resolved not to surrender them without a struggle.

A footstep sounded, then another. They seemed far away, coming closer with a slow and steady rhythm. Then they stopped while yet quite far away. From somewhere in the darkness a voice spoke, to echo



hollowly. "Fenner, I've been waiting for you."

"I came as soon as I could," replied the pseudo Fenner. "When Tex sent the note, he didn't say there was any particular hurry." The Lone Ranger spoke in his own deep voice. His words were crisp clipped. He paused, breath bated, after his reply to the master of the organization. Would the deception be discovered? The next speech reassured him.

"You took quite a chance when made Blinky free Tex Wilson." There was a slight pause before the speaker continued. "But I like men who are willing to take chances. Prison must have done a lot for you."

"Perhaps," was, the reply.

"Wilson didn't like the part I had planned for him, so I had to use him as an example for the others. They haven't seen him yet. When they'll see how disobedience to *my* commands—changes men." The last two words came after an emphatic pause.

The Lone Ranger wished he'd known Judge Masters better. It was inconceivable that he could have changed so much in five years unless his mind had become disordered. Yet, the voice was not that of a madman. It was well modulated, and pleasant. The words were carefully chosen,

and the speech precise and pure. It was the voice of a sane man, and an educated one.

A sudden question occurred to the Lone Ranger and he spoke. "Where is your daughter!"

"That," was the reply, "Is none of your business. My daughter does not in any way enter into my plans. Furthermore, her interest in you dropped when you went to prison for murdering the man she loved" He finished with a sudden question. "Can you run a gold mine?"

"Gold mine?"

"Yes, Catamount Mountain is to be a gold mine. You have been selected as the man to handle certain executive details in connection with it. I promise you a fortune-in return for less than one year's work. You will be expected to obey orders without question, regardless of what those orders are."

"But," evaded the tall man, "I don't know anything about running a gold mine."

"You don't need to. Blinky will teach you all you need to know."

"Is that the job you offered Tex: Wilson!"

"No. Wilson, by training and profession, is a highwayman. His duty would have been to take charge of another branch of my business. To boss others of his, kind. He didn't like the plans I made for him." The voice still remained quite some distance off. It was impossible to estimate the distance in the vast empty space. "There is only; one thing that would stop Wilson," spoke the Lone Ranger. "He would balk at nothing but cold-blooded murder,"

"That," the voice said slowly, "is exactly what he balked at."

So this plot included murder! Probably wholesale murder on a scale too horrible to imagine. Who was to be murdered? What connection would these murders have with a gold mine? How could

gold be found in Catamount Mountain, where there was no gold? Countless other questions raced through the Lone Ranger's mind.

A new sound came. Footsteps racing toward the cavern, and a voice screaming in a frenzied warning. "Boss, Boss, for cripes sake, be careful," The shouts were coming nearer, "That man ain't Deke Fenner."

The Lone Ranger heard a quick intake of breath from the man who had been speaking to him in the chamber. Somewhere down below, the warning was repeated, "Get him, Boss, that ain't Deke Fenner." It was the man called Batdorf who was yelling. He was on the lower level now, where Tex Wilson had been staked. He had a lantern with him, and several of the other outlaws followed him. Retreat was cut off. There was no chance to drop down through the opening in the floor. The Lone Ranger stepped aside to avoid the light that columned up from below. There had been no word of comment from the boss of the gang, Batdorf was yelling again. "I looked in his saddle bags, we found out all about him. Boss, that's not Deke Fenner,. That man is the Lone Ranger,"

For the first time, the boss lost his composure. In his rage, he screamed. "The Lone Ranger?"

Someone was coming up the ladder. Whoever it was, a lantern was coming with him. A light would reveal, the Lone Ranger make him a target for slugs of lead. The boss fired in the hollowness, the gun's roar almost split his eardrums.

The bullet slammed close to the tall man's head He felt the chips of rock cut his face. As he moved quickly to the side, he stumbled over something on the floor. The sound of his fall brought another roar and a lashing orange flame from the gun back there in the dark.

Feeling for the thing that tripped him, the Lone Ranger found some sort of

wooden case. It was empty, not too heavy. He grabbed it eagerly and threw it with all his might at the head of the man who was just emerging from the hole. It was Batdorf. He caught the full force of the hard-thrown box. He howled in pain. There was a crash as he fell off the ladder, landing amid a wreckage of lantern globes and splintered box, on the lower level."

The Lone Ranger moved again, grouched, tense, waiting. Profane curses were rasping from the outlaws down below. From the boss, came no sound. He was waiting somewhere in the darkness. The mystery rider picked up a small rock and tossed it to his right. It fell with a soft thud. Instantly, the leader fired toward the sound, but this time the Lone Ranger was ready.

With the roar, he lunged toward the gun's flash. He dove low, at where he estimated the man's knees would be, and connected.

He felt the impact of his shoulder against the other's knees, then his arms flew around the legs of his opponent and gripped them.

The man was writhing madly, struggling to break the grip of the Lone Ranger.

He yelled at the men below to bring another lantern.

Time was precious. Light on the Lone Ranger would mean instant death by a bullet. He felt with his right hand and found the other's face. His left fist swung hard. There was a crack and an almost inaudible gasp.

The Lone Ranger leaped aside and bounced to his feet, snatching at one of his guns as he did so. The head and shoulders of a man appeared above the opening. The man's hand held a light. He was in the act of setting the lantern down to bring a gun to bear, when the Lone Ranger fired. His bullet shattered the lamp and the place was again in darkness. There was one chance now, one chance in a thousand. The Lone Ranger

raced toward the opening in the darkness. He found it and jumped through. The man on the ladder felt the tall man brush past him and swung with a clubbed pistol, but too late.

Batdorf's voice was loudest as the surprised outlaws felt the tall man in their midst. All were screaming curses, rage and pain, as they felt the flailing fists of the tall man smash right and left to clear a path through them.

Clear for a moment, the Lone Ranger drew "both guns and opened fire.

He kept his shots low trying to strike the outlaws in the legs. The roar of those two heavy weapons was terrific. Shriill scream of pain resounded in the room. The flashes of the tall man's guns betrayed his location and the outlaws opened fire. A dozen guns spoke words of death to the Lone Ranger.

Like angry hornets, lead slugs buzzed, criss-crossing, and beating a tattoo upon the rocky walls. The place was a bedlam of confusion. Hoarse shouts, screams of pain and fury, guns roaring and jets of orange flame lashing out, made a din that must have shaken all of Catamount Mountain. MEN fell, cursing, with bullets in, their legs from the Lone Ranger's sweeping fire. Others fell, victims of their own companions' shots. From all parts of the room, the gun fire came. There were at least a dozen of the outlaws here.

Finally a light appeared. Blinky carried it, descending from the upper level. Apparently some other means of reaching this level existed. He snarled vile curses at the dullards who had been spending their lead in futile effort. The light revealed no sign of the Lone Ranger. None but members of the gang were here. Most amazing of all, Tex Wilson was gone! The four iron stakes marked the place where he had been.

Blinky, surveying the dumfounded killers, screamed his fury, "Gun-crazy

fools," he shrilled, "once you start blatin' lead, you can't stop pullin' the trigger while there's bullets left. Half a dozen of the men were sprawled on the floor, moaning in pain. Two of the gang were dead,

"Patch yourselves up," commanded the one-armed man> "Then get back in the front where you belong. The Lone Ranger can't get out of here alive, and it looks, as if he's dragging what's left of Wilson with him. The poor fool don't know that Wilson's dead."

Several of the outlaws stared in surprise at this announcement.

"Yes, dead, repeated Blinky. "I stuck a knife in him right under the Lone Ranger's nose, and he never know how I did it."

CHAPTER VI.

The Man in Black

TONTO awakened at dawn. He found himself soaked to the skin, and chilled to the marrow. It was a cold, grey dawn and a steady rain was falling to add to the physical discomfort of the mentally tortured Indian.

All night he had been restless, If worrying about his tall companion. Intuition, some sixth sense, told Tonto that the Lone Ranger was in danger. Yet, another day and a half must pass before Tonto could ride to Catamount Cave in search of the mystery rider.

The last instructions of the Lone Ranger, when he left the night before, had been to wait two days before starting in his wake.

Tonto huddled close to the rocky wall to take advantage of the meager shelter from the drizzle.

He looked upstream toward the ridge, barely visible through the rain. Beneath it a small pile of rocks marked Fenner's grave.

As the Indian thought of Fener, a perplexed look came into his face. He

recalled the Lone Ranger's explanation of the accident, as there were things still unaccounted for. Why had Fenner stopped to fire his gun from the center of the narrow bridge? What had brought about the gun-play?

Who had been the target? Up there on the edge of the ravine, there might be some clue. Footprints, the Indian knew, could likely have been washed by the rain, but there might be other signs that could be read. Broken blades of grass would leave a trail; invisible to most men, but easily followed by Tonto,

There came a rumble as of thunder. The big white stallion pawed uneasily at the sound, "What matter with you, White Feller" murmured Tonto, "You not like-um sound of stagecoach?"

The eastbound stage crossed the bridge and soon its sound was lost in the rain. At regular intervals the stages crossed the bridge, carrying partially refined gold from the hills far to the west, to brokers and refiners in the East.

Tonto thought of the settlement a few miles west of the canyon. While not one to let physical discomfort interfere with duty, the Indian saw no advantage in remaining in the gorge while the shelter of the town, might be available. Inaction bothered him. A day and a half of waiting would be wasted time. Perhaps before the Lone Ranger returned, or before it was time to start out for Cantamount Cave, many things might be learned.

Tonto made his decision. He selected a bit of pointed rock, and traced a pattern in the dry sand close to the canyon's wall. It would tell the masked rider where the Indian had gone. To any other observer it would be meaningless,

AN hour later, he was studying the blades of tramped down grass at the western end of the bridge. He muttered something to himself, then leading his horse, moved

toward the community at the Forks, watching the ground at every step.

The north side of Old Catamount, as the hill was familiarly called by settlers, was wasteland. Few people ever went there. The south side, watered by the Catamount River, offered fertile fields for planting and grazing, and quite a community had sprung up when those who found their gold search futile, turned their attention to farming.

When the stage line was organized, the settlement was chosen for a way-station. Horses were replaced and drivers fed and rested.

The community was at first known simply as the "Place where the Catamount River forks," but with the added business of a stage station, it was dignified with the name of "Forks." Most people, however, still referred to it, as the "Place at the Forks."

By far the most important place was the station, where news of the outside world was brought by drivers and guards; news of the gold hills, miles to the west, and news from the East. The most impressive figure in town was big Giles Larkin, branch manager of the stage line.

Larkin, was endowed by nature with a huge figure. He stood well; over six feet in his stocking feet and weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds without an ounce of fat. His huge head and its unruly shock of black curly hair took an oversize stetson. Black, piercing eyes and a heavy, black moustache gave Larkin a forbidding countenance that was deceiving. Most men feared him, and he was inwardly well pleased with the awe that he aroused.

Larkin and old Lige Cooley were the only occupants of the Forks Cafe. Few men went there before noon, but Giles had come at the request of Cooley.

"Say what you got to say an' get it over with, Lige," rumbled the giant. "The

next stage is due soon an' I gotta be on hand."

Lige swallowed hard a few times and his Adam's apple bobbed in his skinny neck. He liked and trusted Giles Larkin; looked upon him as the one man in town whom he could trust with the secret that was in his heart. Many times Giles had proved his friendship. Despite the big man's gruff and generally surly manner, he was sympathetic.

The two men made a strange picture when they were together. Everything about them was in direct contrast. Giles, huge and dark, gruff and surly — Lige — small and light, hesitant and mild. Lige looked about him apprehensively. The only other occupant of the cafe was the bartender, who stood resting his chin on his fist as he leaned on the bar and looked out front at the gloomy weather.

Cooley finished the last of his beer, then wiped his foam-flecked mouth on his shirtsleeve. He cleared his throat several times.

Giles Larkin squirmed. "Get goin'," suggested Giles. "What ails you?"

"I—I got news to tell you," Lige began. "An' you've got to listen to me." He lowered his voice and spoke hurriedly. "Giles, --I killed a man."

Larkin's hand, raised to thunder down in emphasis of another cutting remark, was lowered slowly to the table. His half-open mouth closed slowly. For some seconds he studied the old man, saw the sincerity in the watery blue eyes. In spite of what he saw, he said, "Lige Cooley, you're a liar."

"B-but," protested Lige, "I did. That is—I just the same as killed a man. If it wasn't fer me, he'd been alive today. I—I wasn't goin' to tell a soul about it, but it's rankled in my mind all night. I ain't slept a wink. I got to tell someone—then—then I reckon I'll go to Sheriff Burton and give myself up." He sighed profoundly, "They

ain't no use in livin' now with that murder on my soul."

"Well, old timer, let's hear the gory details. I still don't believe a word you said. In the first place, you ain't a killin' kind and in the Second place, you ain't got the strength to hurt a cockroach." His voice was gruff, though soft, but there was a sympathetic quality to it. Lige Cooley was perhaps the only man in town that Larkin gave a hoot about and he really felt sorry for the old man who seemed to have so futile an existence. "Who is the crittur?" he asked softly.

Lefty, the bartender, was no longer looking out the window. He didn't betray any interest in the soft voices, but a close observer might have seen him wiping off the glasses on the back bar and working gradually closer to the two men,

Deke Fenner," said Lige.

"Fenner!" echoed Larkin.

Lefty kept his back turned toward the table so his face would not show his emotions. Apparently Cooley's statement was of particular interest to him.

"Deke Fenner. I've sworn fer five years to get him when he got out of jail. He got out the other day over at Redstone, I heard the boys here talkin' of it, and' yesterday I waited fer him at the gorge. When he crossed the bridge, I fired, but my gun didn't go off. He heard the click, though, an' fired on me, an' his horse throwed him into the ravine."

"Um-m, so he's dead."

"Yere, Giles, he's dead all right, an' I'm the one tuh blame."

Larkin laughed outright in old Cooley's face. "You blamed old conscience-struck fool, if you hadn't killed Deke Fenner, there's plenty others that would've. That skunk was due fer a necktie party if he showed his face around here. But you didn't kill him. There ain't no one can say you did. Go on an' tell your whole fool story to Bob

Burton if it'll make you feel any better, but Burton won't do nothin' more than to send some men out to bury the remains. Shucks, don't lose no sleep over that!"

LIGE felt relieved. If Giles Larkin felt as he did, it was asure bet that other men would echo his opinion. They always did.

"Thunderation," exploded Larkin. "If you had the things to worry you that I got, then you'd have a right to lose some sleep. Look at me," he shouted. "Worried half sick with these stage coach robberies of the past three weeks. Six stages stopped between the gold fields at the Forks, each one cleaned out of the gold it held, and both guard and driver shot."

"I know it, Giles," said Cooley, sympathetically. "I should think there'd be somethin' done about it."

"Somethin' done! D'you think we're all wearin' out the seat of our pants polishin' chairs an' do-in' nothin'? An' you!" finished Giles. "Moanin' about a rat like Deke Fenner gettin' throwed off His horse, an' huntin' sympathy from me with all I got mind."

"I—I'm sure-nuff sorry, said Lige apologetically.

"Everyone hated Fenner's guts. They was most ready to lynch Judge Masters fer not throwin' the jury out an' callin' a new trial so to get Deke swung fer murderin' your son. Fact is, it's been my private notion that Masters knowed of this an' dug out of town on account of it." He leaned back in his chair and barked,

"Gimmee a drink!"

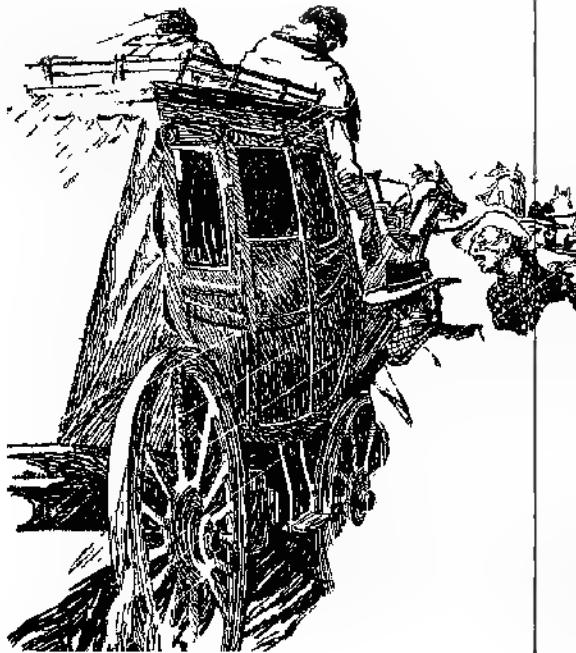
"I got it right here," said Lefty. •

Larkin grabbed a glass from the tray and emptied it in great gulp. Lige tossed out a coin. When Lefty bent to scoop it up, Larkin noticed a patch on the sidee of the bartender's head, "Who cracked you!" he asked. "I

Before the bartender could answer, the swinging doors opened and a tall man stepped in. He was dressed in the clothes of

an Easterner—a long, black coat and a tall hat, both of which dripped water in a rapidly spreading puddle on the floor.

There was a tinny crash, Lefty dropped the tray to stare in bold amazement. Lige rubbed his eyes and looked again at the tall slim figure. Giles Larkin was first to speak and the roar of his voice topped everything he'd said before. "Speak of the devil he's bound to appear. By all that's holy, if it ain't Judge Masters!"



CHAPTER VII

Death Rides the Stage

JUDGE MASTERS, in his black hat and coat, seemed to be the personification of the dreary rain that fell with tiresome steadiness outside. Tall and grim, he stood there observing the men at the table.

The years had aged him. His hair was snow-white now, instead of black, touched with grey. The lines on his patrician face had deepened, and there was a look of worry in his eyes. Yet, he still held his head in the same proud manner, and stood with

all the poise and dignity he'd, shown while a presiding jurist on the bench.

"The town hasn't changed. has it Giles!" Masters' was soft and pleasant to listen to. "Not as much as I have. Am I welcome at your table!"

"Sure thing, sit yerself down. Gosh sakes, there ain't a man more welcome."

"Cooley," said Masters, advancing a few steps. "I hope you no ill-feeling toward me."

"Shucks no," replied Lige, "Not now. I was sort of put out when I seen that Fenner critter get five years instead o' the rope, I reckon that warn't no fault of yours."

Judge Masters removed His wet coat, and draped it with meticulous care over the back of a convenient chair and sat down. "I'm glad you don't hold that against me," he said. "I had no choice, my duty was merely to fulfill the desires of the jury."

"Yere, I reckon so," agreed Lige Cooley. "Anyhow, Deke Fenner's dead now, so it don't matter much."

"Dead?" The surprise of Judge Masters seemed genuine.

"Dead as a doornail," said Giles. He hoped to forestall another lengthy detailed account by Lige. "Crossed the bridge, fired his gun, scared his hoss. Hoss bucked, Deke fell. Lige is goin' tuh tell Sheriff Bob Burton an' have some boys sent out tuh bury him."

"Well," said Masters thoughtfully, "He has paid in full for his crime."

Larkin signaled Lefty and ordered a round of drinks. When the bartender brought them he stood by the table, as if he wanted to take part in the conversation, but a frown on Larkin's face sent him back to his own domain, behind the bar,

Lefty was so engrossed in the conversation between the Judge and the two townsmen that he didn't notice a man sitting at a table near the door.

Tonto had slipped into the Forks Cafe, only a moment after the Judge, and

taken a table quietly near the door. Past experience had taught Tonto that for information concerning any subject in a community, the cafe was the place to listen. In a twenty-four hour period, everything of importance or interest—all the gossip and scandal, would be discussed.

IN less than five minutes, the In dian had learned two important things.

First—it was known that Deke Fenner was dead. Second— Judge Masters had returned to town. What was the Judge doing here? Why wasn't he at Catamount Cave to keep the rendezvous with Deke Fenner!

Tonto saw danger for his friend, the Lone Ranger. If the masked rider was in the cave, posing as Deke Fenner, the Judge must be aware of the disguise. He waited hoping to hear more. The Judge was telling of the years spent, in the East "Then," he said, "I came back to Catamount Mountain. I've been in the mountain region for several months, making tests for my eastern friends."

"Tests for what!" Burst out Giles Larkin.

"Gold," was the astonishing" reply, "Gentlemen, there is gold in the mountain."

Lige shook his old head, "Judge," he began slowly, "I hate fer yuh tuh have been wastin' yer time an' strength, but I reckon I got tuh tell yuh, yore barkin' up the wrong tree an' diggin' in the wrong mountain. I come herewith the first white folks tuh settle. I seen 'em all scour Old Catamount—I scoured it myself, an' dug holes till the hull place looked like a battlefield, an' I panned streams; on the North'ard side till they warn't no more tuh pan, an' there! ain't a smidge o' gold in the hull; blamed mountain."

"Lige is right," said Giles. "No gold there." The Judge smiled tolerantly at the two. "That is what was said by everyone." He leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. His

blue-veined hand seemed to shake a trifle when he went on speaking. He chose each word carefully. "It was said that there was no goldl there, but tests have proved otherwise."

"How's that!" said Lige.

"The gold exists in a state and combination that isn't generally known. It can, however, be extracted by a new process and shipped East in the same condition as the other ores—partially refined, and in a semi-pure state."

Giles looked his disbelief. He wondered if the aged gentleman was slightly addled. "Loco," he thought to himself.

The Judge saw a patch on side of the staring Lefty's slick haired head. He felt of his owm smooth-shaven jaw. "It is hard for me to talk very much," he complained, "I had a fall and almost dislocated my jaw. It is quite sore."

Lefty grinned quite frankly at the Judge's statement and felt his own bruised face.

"Say, I've got to go," exclaimed] Larkin suddenly. He hauled out watch and looked at it.

"Stage is due from the west most any minute now. I've got to 'tend my job." He made for the door, and saw Tonto sitting there. "Where'd you come from!" he bellowed,

Before Tonto could make a reply, bedlam broke loose outside. Above the rain there came a clatter of hoofs and a distant voice shouted something about the stage.

A LUMBERING six-in-hand broke into view outside the cafe. The horses were lathered and winded from a frantic pace. Mud and water flew from beneath huge wheels of the coach. It bounced crazily, straining at the joints and threatening to spill at every mud-hole.

"Stop that wild drivin',"screamed Giles Larkin. He slammed through the' swinging doors, disregarding rain and

puddles as huge legs carried him after the stage. "I'll fine Ben Harden a full month's pay fer drivin' them hosses like that."

Tonto went out after him. The Indian saw what Giles did not see. Driver and the guard were in their places but their positions were strained. Both were lashed to the seat and both heads bobbed uncontrolled with every movement of the stage.

A knot of men were clustered at the station where the heaving, grunting horses halted. Two men were already on the coach when Larkin ran up. They were cutting rawhide lashings that held the guard and Ben Harden, the driver, to the seat. Other hands lowered the two still form to the ground and carried them inside the small station office.

Larkin burst through the door. "What's the matter with 'em?" he yelled. "Don't tell me it's the same thing happened all over again!"

Sheriff Burton looked at the District Manager, "Same old story, Giles," the lawman said,

"You mean them two are dead?"

"Shot through the head, both of them, Killed by the first slug,"

Slowly Larkin removed his big sombrero. The other men followed suit. "Two o' the best boys that ever rid a stage," said Giles. "I—I liked Ben Harden like he was my own brother. Damn it all, Bob, I suspect there ain't no need tuh look an' see if the load of ore that was on the stage has been stolen,"

"It's gone all right" someone said.

"Same bunch that's robbed the other stages. Done in the same way." Deputy Martin was examining the men when he spoke. "These boys didn't see nothin' connin'—didn't have no reason to suspect anything was goin' to happen. They was shot without a warnin'"



Giles' big body was shaking. He turned His back on those assembled and went through the door to his own office. The door slammed behind him and he sat down in the creaking chair.

"It's too much," he breathed. "I—I can't send any more boys out on that gold run—n-not until these killin' skunks are captured,"

He drew a black ledger toward him and opened it at the second page. There was a list of names there, drivers and guards, hired by the stage line; each one of them a clean-cut, straight-shooting man. The kind of man that Giles Larkin respected and admired.

He ran his thick forefinger down the column reading certain names aloud. "Gale Hastings, Bryant Cole, Dan Deacon." A lump came in his throat. "Deacon was the kid that was so eager to help build up this western country," he murmured.

With a huge sigh, Giles dipped a pen in the inkwell, then lowly drew a line through two more names. . "Abe Pratt, guard, and Ben hardin, driver."

Larkin's mouth clamped shut with firm resolve. He closed the book with a snap and jammed it back in a pigeon-hole in the big desk. He slammed his hand down, hard, then shoved back his chair. He was through the door in an instant, barking an order at one of the men.

"Get over to the telegraph," he ordered. "Tell the station at Goldstream that another stage has been robbed an' two more men have been killed. Tell 'em not to send out more stages."

"But," protested a voice. "they've got to go through. It's in the contract, Larkin."

"Do what I say," roared the district Manager. "An' tell 'em I'm goin' west as fast as a hoss'll take me! Tell 'em that the next stage that goes through will find me drivin' it. I'm goin' to get to the bottom of this wholesale murder!"

"Now Giles," began the Sheriff. "As for you, Bob Burton," roared the big man, "if you can't put an end to all this killin' an' robbing then it's time we got someone that could."

"I'm short-handed, Giles. I—"

"Then get more men. Damn, I'm short-handed, too, an' gettin' shorter-handed all the time. It strikes me that whoever is behind these robbings, it's someone that's got a way to learn just what stages will be totin' gold! There's a clue to start work on!"

Larkin was like a giant dynamo running at top speed. He charged all those around him with activity. One man was sent on the run to fetch the best horse in the region. Another to make sure the telegram was sent. A pair of men raced for Larkin's house to fetch the things he'd need with him for the trip, and Bob Burton, the Sheriff, listened to a ripping roar of profanity directed at his weaknesses while Larkin paced the floor.

On the fringe of the waterlogged crowd that surrounded the station, Lige Cooley stood beside the Judge. The old man

grinned at Masters when Giles' roaring reached new peaks. "Ain't he swell?" he murmured proudly.

CHAPTER VIII

The Cavern Woman

THE Lone Ranger was lost. For countless hours he had been groping, fumbling and feeling his way through the total blackness of endless tunnels in the vast underground maze called Catamount. Finally he sank to the rock floor in utter exhaustion. His brain reeled with hunger and fatigue as he lay there only partly conscious, trying desperately to keep his senses and gather strength to renew his search for some sign of light.

Dimly he recalled events of the past few hours. The talk with the Boss, then the fight against a dozen outlaws. The scene in the chamber came back to him vividly. He remembered putting his own guns back into their holsters while the outlaws wasted bullets on each other.

He recalled how he had dropped flat to the floor and crawled on his stomach toward Tex Wilson—how he dragged Tex after him, finding the small opening in the cavern by instinct and hauling the still form of the outlaw through it after him.

Then he had shouldered Wilson, and while the killers' guns roared in the torture chamber, he made his slow way toward what he thought would be the main cavern, where Silver was waiting. But Tex was heavy and the footing was unsure. His progress was slow, and somewhere in the dark he failed to make the proper turn.

After almost half an hour of travel, he knew that he *was* lost. Lowering Tex Wilson to the floor, he stood and listened intently, trying to catch some distant sound, but there was only silence. A silence so thick, in a darkness so intense, that he felt

smothered, gripped by the awful lonesomeness of the place.

"Tex may know the way," he thought. "If I can rouse him." He knelt and felt of the outlaw's face. It was cold to the touch. The Lone Ranger felt a sudden giddiness when a grim realization came to him. He felt of the man's naked breast, but there was no heartbeat. Instead, he felt the handle of a knife protruding from the body. Tex was dead! The tall man didn't know then how Wilson had been stabbed. He assumed it was done in the melee to keep him from taking part in the fray. Little did the Lone Ranger suspect the strange means that Blinky used to kill Tex Wilson right before his eyes. If he could only have known—if he but knew the secret of the cripple's twisted body—what there was about it seemed so curiously out of keeping—but he didn't know.

There was no choice but to leave the dead man and go on. For countless hours, he felt his way through passage after passage, around turn after turn, sometimes going up an incline and at other times, descending. The peril of a bottomless hole was always present. Every step must be made with care, felt out in advance, lest he drop to certain death. The strain on his nerves was more than many strong men could have endured.

Finally, he paused to rest. He leaned against the wall, and felt his knees growing weak beneath him. His brain was whirling despite his efforts to maintain control of himself. He felt giddy, dazed; the floor seemed unsteady, seemed to be spinning crazily. "I must keep going," he muttered. "Must keep going." Then buckled and he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

When finally awakened, he stiff and lame. By this, he knew his nap had been a lengthy one. He hadn't the faintest notion how long he had been in the caves—of whether it was day or night, it was forever night.



He rose and flexed his aching muscles, kicking out his legs and moving his shoulders and arms. His tongue was swollen and his mouth parched with thirst. "Must keep going," he murmured.

Purposely wandering was useless. He must form some sort of plan. Somewhere, very faintly, he heard the sound of water. At first he thought it was a delusion of his mind, but it persisted. He'd heard it once before, in the cavern where the Boss had spoken to him. He heard it now; water, he thought, of almost any sort, would at least slake his thirst and help him carry on.

He ran his hand against the wall beside him, but unlike the walls in the first tunnel he'd traversed, they were dry. He listened—judged the direction from which sound came, and started toward it.

One hand was stretched out on each side, feeling both walls of the tunnel. When he found a bisecting or diverging tunnel, he paused to listen. Sometimes he continued straight, and at other times he made a turn; right or left, always going toward the sound.

He felt encouraged when the gushing became louder and nearer.

Once he made a turn and the sound grew weaker, then he went back to correct his error.

Concentration on the running water kept him going; half an hour—an hour. At least there was some purpose in his groping progress. He realized that even if he did locate the underground river, there was no assurance that it would lead him to the open, but he kept on.

Suddenly he stopped.

The wall on his left was moist. Water seeped from between the layers of rock, dropping in gentle splashes to the floor. Water—if he could just collect it,

The Lone Ranger dropped to his knees and felt the ground. It was damp, but fine sand had absorbed the moisture. A dent punched in his hat would collect the precious drops until there was enough to drink. He fixed his hat, then sat to wait. The rushing seemed to be a torrent now, and close at hand.

The drink, when finally collected, proved a God-send. It gave him renewed strength, eased his parched throat, and cooled his burning tongue. He was ready to go on. He moved away for half a dozen paces, then returned. He started in the other direction but again he came back. Were his ears betraying him? No matter which way he went, he seemed to go away from the stream. He experienced further with the same results.

"I should have known," he muttered, in disgust. "That water is right beyond the side of this tunnel. I've come as close to it as I can get. He laughed bitterly. All these hours of searching had brought him only this—a solid wall of rock, perhaps yards in thickness, that was between him and the subterranean stream.

HE stood there, defeated. The masked man who had outwitted countless

outlaws in his years of adventure, was finally beaten by a cave. The masked rider, who had helped countless people in their trouble, was unable now to help himself.

He thought of Silver, the gallant stallion that had been with him on all his trails. Silver, out there somewhere, to be beaten, perhaps to death, by cruel men, who would try and break the spirit of the great horse. He thought of Tonto.

The Lone Ranger still carried his two heavy guns. A shot might bring men to his side. Blinky knew his way about the tunnels.

Batdorf, too, seemed to have found his way through, at least, part them.

If the men came, he would again be pitted against great odds, but this time, he would not shoot high.

Never in his life had the Lone ranger shot to kill. Now when his own death was certain, he would do differently. Every one of the gang was marked for hanging, if the law could find him. Each one who fell before the mystery rider's guns would be one less who would rob and plunder helpless people.

First, there was one thing he would do. The remnants of his disguise as Deke Fenner still clung to his face. He held his bandanna beneath the dripping water until it was moist, meanwhile pulling away the hair that formed sideburns and moustache.

Then he scrubbed his face as best he could. "At any rate," he murmured, "when they get me, I'll die as I have lived—masked.

From beneath his shirt, he drew the mask and fastened it behind his head. Now, probably for the last time, he was the masked mystery rider—the Lone Ranger. As Deke Fenner, he felt insecure, uncertain how to act, afraid that every move might be the wrong one. The mask gave him a buoyancy ... a new confidence in himself. He straightened up— then drew his guns. He felt the chambers to make certain they

were fully loaded; and hoped shots would bring some action. Anything was better than waiting in idleness for death to overtake him.

He raised one gun, and fired, The blast echoed re-echoed,

From great depths the sound of an explosion was hurled back to his ears. He fired again, and heard the zing of the heavy heavy bullet as it sped down the tunnel to slam into a distant wall. Then he waited, hoping for some sound of running feet, some sign of an approaching light. Instead, he heard—a woman's scream!

It froze him. It was a scream of mortal anguish. The scream of a torture-torn soul. The masked man tried to place the sound. As early as he could figure, it came from just beyond the wall. From the same place as the sound of the water. He stepped close and pressed his ear against the rock

A girl's voice came to him—a sobbing voice. "They've killed him. All your promises meant nothing. You've killed my father."

Several men laughed"

One said, "He's as well off dead as livin' like he was, ain't that so?

Another man agreed.

"L-let me go to him." Begged the girl. "Please let me go."

"You stay right here where yer out o' trouble," growled the man whom the Lone Ranger identified as Lem. "There ain't many of the boys would treat you like me an' Breed Porter has." For a moment there was silence, then suddenly the girl's voice rang out with determination. "I'm going!" There was no trace of fear or hysteria now.

Lem cursed vilely, and shouted. "Grab her—she's busted loose, grab her, the little Hell-cat!"

"Damn these rocks," roared Breed. The Lone Ranger heard the outlaw stumble. He was cursing with pain and rage.

"Stop or I'll drill yuh," shouted Lem, A gun barked as the sound of the girl's footsteps faded away.

He stood ready, with both guns resting on his hips, eager and anxious to make a stand, even though a hopeless one against the entire band of killers.

The light grew brighter, then a figure burst full into view. The running figure of a slim girl, carrying a lantern. "Father," she called. "Father—are you alive!" She stumbled and almost fell in her feverish haste.

The Lone Ranger holstered his weapons and stepped forward to meet her. "Here," he called.

The girl was almost to him before she saw the mask. A startled little scream broke through her lips. The masked man took her by the arm. "Listen to me," he said.

"Let me go. L-let me go, you murderer," She was struggling against the strong grip of the mystery man. Her brown eyes were moist with tears of anguish and futility as she found the struggle hopeless. "Y-you d-dirty murder-or! Y-you are the one who . . . who killed my father. Where's he?"

"You're wrong!" The masked man's voice was sharp and incisive. "No one has been shot—at least, not by me and not in here. I fired in the hope that someone would come and show me the way out of here."

"The—the w-way out?" stahimered the girl.

Two men came around the bend with another lantern. Their harsh shouts rang ahead of them. The Lone Ranger snatched the lantern from the girl and dashed it to the floor. It shattered and went out. "Now we won't be a target for them. What's on the other side of this wall?" Realizing that here was a captive like herself, the girl hurriedly explained. "There's another tunnel that runs alongside this one. They meet down at the end where, I just came from."

"Where does the other tunnel lead?"

"To a great-big cavern ... a place where all the outlaws live, and where the horses are kept." The slim, dark-haired girl was steadied by the quiet courage of the Lone Ranger. She knew that, in this man she had an ally. Something seemed to tell her he was a man who could be trusted. She saw the running outlaws, and realized the need for haste. She gave, as much information as she could, in as few words as possible.

"There are four men in the big cavern now. The rest are out ... out raiding ... and ... and killing." She saw the two men coming toward them. "Four besides those two," she finished.

The approaching light revealed the Lone Ranger and the girl at his side. Lem saw the couple and screamed, "There they are. Drop 'em. Blaze at 'em."

"Down," commanded the masked man. He almost threw the girl to the ground with one hand, while his other snatched his gun and fired. Glass flew from Breed's hand as the shattered lantern practically exploded at the impact of the bullet. Another gunshot split the tunnel and a scream of pain was followed by the thud of a falling body.

"Come on," snapped the masked man. "We'll make a dash for it. Stay close behind me." Charging forward, he kept his two guns, blazing. He stumbled over the fallen body of one of the men, and felt the hard fist of the other graze his ear. He brought his gun around full force. It slammed against the killer's head with stunning force. There was a crack of metal against bone and a soft groan, as Lem dropped like a poled steer.

"I'm right behind you," a girl's voice said. "Lead the way."

IN a moment they made the sharp turn at the end of the wall between the parallel tunnels. Directly ahead the Lone Ranger saw a patch of daylight. The water

that he'd heard was rushing along one side of the tunnel, fed by a valley stream outside to disappear behind him in the darkness.

The girl was speaking breathlessly. "There's the entrance to the cavern,—it's a big room—"

"I know of it."

"That's where the four guards are kept,"

"That's where my horse will be waiting."

"There are the guards." The girl's voice was almost a scream. Four men appeared outlined against the light. The Lone Ranger halted.

"Oh, it's hopeless," the girl was saying. "We can't get by those men."

"We'll see." In the darkness, keeping a sharp eye on the grim quartette that stood looking curiously back into the gloom, trying to learn the cause of the excitement, the masked man was jamming fresh cartridges in his weapons.

At any moment, he knew, the men would start toward them.

There was the further chance that Lem and Breed might regain consciousness and charge them from behind. "Silver," he thought. "Silver is out there." He raised his voice in a hearty ringing shout, "Silver, old fellow, where are you, Silver?" His lips pursed, and a shrill familiar whistle filled the cave.

From beyond the men came a mighty whinny of equine joy. Then a frantic clatter of hoofs—a smashing sound as the big stallion broke loose from the tether pole.

Amazement filled the girl's voice. "Your horse—Silver! You—you must be the Lone Ranger! Oh thank God for that."

Her voice was lost in the clamour ahead. The four men wheeled to face a frantic, charging horse—fighting, pawing—biting at them.

"Down here, Silver," shouted the Lone Ranger. He moved ahead, the girl

close at his heels. Silver was lashing with the fury of a dozen devils at the men who tried to keep him back.

A harsh voice rasped a warning, but too late. The plunging, pounding hoofs struck down one of the outlaws. Another tried to bring his gun to bear. Before his finger pressed the trigger the heavy .44 of the Lone Ranger spoke.

There was a yell of pain as the outlaws gun-hand was smashed.

"Stand back," barked the **Lone Ranger**. The two surviving killers closed in, each one with a gun level. The tall mystery rider ducked low as they fired. Their bullets zoomed over his head harmlessly.

Silver reared again, striking out with those hard-driven hoofs. The Lone Ranger fired from his crouch. He saw one man go down, while the other whirled at a bellow of fury from Silver. One lashing hoof caught the man on the-shoulder.

There was a sickening snap, and the outlaw fell shrieking with the pain of a broken collarbone.

"Steady Silver, steady boy," commanded the masked man. He pushed one of his guns toward the girl. "Keep those men covered while I get the saddle," he said. "Come on Silver!"

He raced across the cavern, grabbed his saddle and the bridle, then shouted back to the dark-haired girl who held a steady gun on the four men sprawled upon the cavern's floor. "Shoot any one of them who tries to rise."

"I will," was the reply. Her tone showed that she meant it. She watched the killers in their pain. Two of them were unconscious, the other two mouthed vile curses that under any other conditions would have made the girl blush awkwardly, but now she scarcely heard what was being said. Her thoughts were of the Lone Ranger.

His fingers flew as he snapped the straps in place and drew the cinch tight. The

saddle bag, he noted, had been rifled. "Ready at last," he called. Swinging into the saddle he reached down and helped the girl to mount. Then Catamount Cavern was filled again with the ringing hearty shout of the Lone Ranger. "Heigh Y, Silver!"

The horse lurched forward; the fast beat of its hoofs ringing in the cavern. At last they had reached the opening into the valley beyond. Ahead, was freedom, and a chance to gather new strength for a battle to the finish with the gang that occupied the Cave of Terror.



CHAPTER IX.

Meeting *in* the Rain

SINCE before dawn the leaden sky had dripped with monotonous steadiness. It was this rain that had swollen the stream that ran from Catamount Valley into the cave, and made a gushing, torrent that brought the Lone Ranger to his freedom.

The same rain had driven Tonto from the canyon at dawn of that eventful day and sent him following Lige Cooley's trail to town." The rain made the ground around Old Catamount quite slippery, the footing insecure. After the first two miles, at breakneck speed, with the girl clutched before him on the saddle, the Lone Ranger reduced the pace of Silver to a trot. He was skirting the mountain, to reach the south side. "I'm not sure whether to go to the canyon for my friend, or take you to town first," he told the girl.

"Please don't think of me. You saved my life, that's quite enough, for one day." Her courage made the tall man thrill with admiration. Not once had she complained, about the fearful pace of the horse. She showed no sign of the discomfort, the actual pain of the stinging rain that lashed her face.

"If you'll let me down, any place, I'll find my way to town, and—and—" she hesitated.

"Get the law after the men who held you?" finished the masked man for her. For a moment the girl made no reply. "Or will you forget what has been done?"

"I don't know what to do. You see—the girl paused again. The Lone Ranger waited patiently for to continue, "My father is still in the hands of those men. I'm afraid they'll murder him. You may have heard of him. He is Judge Masters." This was no great surprise to The Lone Ranger.

"Your father is supposed to be the leader of the of outlaws," said the masked man simply.

"Do you believe that?"

"I spoke to the leader. He had the cultured voice of a Judge."

"Did you see my father!"

"No." The man behind the mask kned Silver slightly to increase the pace a bit. The gloomy day darkening prematurely and he wanted to get around Old Catamount before total darkness came, decided to go first to the Forks, and leave Peggy Masters there. Then to go to the canyon and find Tonto and make plans for a definite war against the outlaws in the cavern,

Peggy was speaking again. "Father and I came West several weeks ago."

"I heard that."

"Well, someone sent a message to Dad, he didn't tell me what it was, but he said we were coming back to this country. We came by the stage route north of here to Galusha. There we took horses and started for the Forks ."You don't know who the letter came from!" interrupted the man.

"He didn't tell me, I've no idea wat it said or who it came from."

"What happened after you left Galusha?"

"We were caught by a storm in the valley, a much worse storm than this. Father was afraid we'd lose the trail and he suggested that we take refuge in the cave. We went in, and took our horses with us. There were men there, at least a dozen of them. They surrounded us, and took me back in that tunnel where the water flows. I've been there ever since."

"Have you seen your father since then?"

"No."

FOR some time the ride was continued in silence, with only the dripping of the rain and the steady clump of Silver's hoofs to break the stillness.

"It was the Lone Ranger who spoke first. "Have you any. Idea what the gang is planning to do?" he asked.

"It is something about gold that's all I know," answered Peggy.

It was hard to believe that Judge Masters was the leader of the gang. Hard to think a fine man could become so depraved. It simply did not make sense.

Yet, who but Masters would know about the criminals and be able to reach them and assemble them as had been done? Who but the Judge would be able to whip them into absolute submission and; blind obedience to a stern unbending will?

Every thing simmered down to one definite decision. The Judge must be found!

Peggy spoke again. "I can't ask anything more of you. If you will let me off your horse somewhere near the town, I'll look for Sheriff Burton... if he's still the Sheriff.

It was dusk, and one could scarcely see more than fifty yards ahead, so when another horseman rode out of the misty rain toward the Lone Ranger, they came upon each other suddenly.

The man was on a snow-white horse—a companion horse to mighty Silver. It was Tonto!

At the sight of the masked man the Indian broke into a shout of greeting. "Taheel!" he screamed through the rain.

"Kee-Mo-Sah-Bey!" cried the Lone Ranger. The expression was one of friendship that he frequently used to Tonto. "Tonto, where have you come from?"

"Me come hunt-um for you," began the Indian. "Me think you got-um plenty danger."

In his joy, seeing the white friend alive and unjured, he ignored the girl completely.

"But what brought you here? You were to wait in the canyon until tomorrow night before you came for me."

BRIEFLY, Tonto explained how he had left the gorge at dawn that day and

followed a trail to town. He told how he'd sat in the cafe and heard that Deke Fenner's death was known.

"That why me come after you," he said. "You take-um disguise of Fenner. Boss of gang know Fenner dead."

"The Boss of the gang? What do you mean by that, Tonto? Who's the Boss?"

"Judge Masters — him big boss."

There was a quick intake of breath as Peggy gasped at this announcement.

"What do you know about my father?" she exclaimed.

"Me see-um him."

The masked man leaned forward quickly, eagerly. "Where did you see him?" he snapped.

"Him in cafe. Feller there plenty much surprise to see-um him,"

"So he was not a prisoner in the Cave."

"He was—he was!" almost touted Peggy. "He couldn't have been a member of the gang."

"Was he alone?" asked the masked man.

"Him go-um there alone."

The Lone Ranger thought of the fight in the Boss' chamber the night before.

"Tell me, Tonto, was the Judge injured in any way?"

"Not see-um mark of wound."

"Around the face or head?"

The Indian thought a moment, then said slowly. "Um... him tell-um feller plenty hard to talk. Got-um plenty sore jaw." Tonto rubbed the side of his face to illustrate where the Judge had complained of soreness.

"It connects." The masked man spoke decisively. "Last night I fought with the Boss of the outlaws in the cave. I knocked him down."

Impossible, fantastic though it seemed, the Judge must be the leader of the villainous crew.



Peggy's lips were quivering now—she was sobbing softly. The masked man felt sorry for her. "Steady," he said, sympathetically. "Keep your chin up. We're going to get all the facts before we make any decisions."

"I—I know what *you* think, I—I won't believe it, though. I can't believe that father . . . father," She couldn't finish.

Tonto eyed the girl in curiosity. He didn't ask any question, though—he knew that when his tall masked friend was ready to talk, he would explain all that needed explaining.

"We're going to town, Tonto. I want to see the Judge myself. There are a lot of things I'd like to ask him!"

CHAPTER X The First Blow

PEOPLE in the Forks were used to accepting things as they saw them, -without asking questions. Since capital from the East had been buying up oil lands and gold fields in the West, and paying a tenth of what they

were worth to the Indians who held them, a red man with money in his pocket was not looked upon as the oddity he might have been ten years before.

Tonto had no difficulty in renting sleeping quarters for the night. Not nearly as much difficulty as he had in smuggling the Lone Ranger, masked, into the room by means of the window which faced the main thoroughfare of town - and overlooked the Forks Cafe across the road.

These precautions were taken because the masked man thought it quite likely that members of the Cavern gang might lurk in town. Any one of them would be eager for the chance to shoot him on sight. They hadn't bothered to search him out while in the tunnel, knowing that escape by any means other than the well-guarded cavern, was impossible. If he hadn't died in the tunnels, he'd have been shot trying to escape. Neither, thing had happened, thanks to Peggy Masters and the hoofs of Silver.

The Lone Ranger gave a sigh of relief when he was finally inside a meagerly furnished room, sank, exhausted, in a horsehide chair and looked wistfully toward the bed.:

"You take-um nap," said Tonto. "Me go-um out, find-um where Judge is."

"That fellow you mentioned Tonto—the stage driver, has gone West, hasn't he!" Tonto nodded.

"And he won't be back until the stage that's due at noon tomorrow."

"That's right. The bartender who was on the job might know where Masters went,"

Again the red-banded, dark haired head shook in negation!

"Him name Slocum—call 'um Lefty Slocum. Him not work at night. Him work-um in day time."

"Find him or Lige Cooley. You said the Judge was talking to Lige."

"Me hunt-um for both fellers," agreed the Indian. "Start-um out now."

"Don't tell him," said the masked man, "that we brought his daughter from the Cave. Don't tell him anything. If you find him bring him here." Tonto nodded agreement.

He went out the door and closed it behind him. The Lone Ranger closed his eyes and let his long, strong hands fall limply on each side of the chair. Slowly, the thoughts of a pock-marked face, a horrible cavern of dark despair, killers and tunnels, faded into nothingness. The Lone Ranger slept till daybreak.

Tonto wakened his tall friend when the first pink tints of sun broke over the eastern horizon. The Lone Ranger was instantly alert. The last thing he had thought of when he went to sleep, was the first thing to recur to him this morning. "Did you find the Judge?" he asked.

"Not find-um him." Tonto was fairly bursting with news, however. "Find-um Lige Cooley," he said. "Him tell-um plenty."

Then Tonto told all that he had learned from Lige. First, Lige had admitted being present when Deke Fernner was killed. Tonto knew that, the moment he saw the old man's cartridge belt, and a few odd rifle bullets on a dresser. They were the same style and size as a defective cartridge the Indian carried from the edge of the canyon. Charged with this, Lige was willing to tell about his part in the death and many other things. He told Tonto how Giles Larkin had complained about the many stage-coach robberies of gold and the death of many guards and drivers. Then he told about Judge Masters—how the man was planning to build a refinery on the mountain and get gold from the ground. This information brought the Lone Ranger to his feet. He grabbed the Indian by the shoulders, and his voice shook with emotion when he spoke. "Tonto, that's it. That's the answer.

It's as plain as day now! There is no gold in the mountain. ..."

"Me know-um that."

"Except what gold is put there. Gold that's stolen from the stages by those outlaws. The worst kind of killers, who shoot down guards and drivers so there are no witnesses against; them. The gold is taken from the stage to the cavern. It's stored there. Meanwhile, the Judge is using his honorable record to build a refinery. The gold will supposedly be put through here. No one will question the gold that's sent by the Judge to the East. That's the means he'll use to put his stolen gold back in circulation."

Tonto blinked slowly. The Lone Ranger was speaking fast and snapping his words out in short, clipped sentences. Tonto was trying hard to follow him. "Don't you see? The big risk that gold thieves have to run is in making use of their gold. When they try to sell it, they're caught. The way to get around that is to make believe the gold is taken from Old Catamount. The Judge will build a refinery, and ship to the East from there, and unless that gang is smashed, no one will be the wiser. The stolen gold will never be found!"

Tonto gathered that the Judge was the leader of the outlaw band, and said so. The Lone Ranger was hauling on his boots. He agreed. "No question about it now, in spite of what his daughter says and thinks."

He doused his face with water from a basin, and dried himself. A single sweep of a comb laid his hair back from his forehead. Then he strapped on his heavy guns, "We're ready," he said, reaching for his hat.

"Where we go-um?"

"We're going to meet the stage, to try and save the life of Giles Larkin. Then we're going to take Giles with us, and as many other men as possible, and storm the Cave in Catamount!"



THE Lone Ranger was through the door—Tonto at his heels. The tall, masked figure raced down the steps to the first floor of the hotel, and a wide-eyed clerk saw the masked man go out through the door. He blinked, and muttered stupidly, "Where inarnation did *that* come from?"

Tonto's horse was already saddled, as the Indian had left it after his night of work. Silver was ready in a moment, then the two men leaped to the saddle and dashed toward the West.

"Come on, Silver!" shouted the Lone Ranger, as he kept the horse lunging over the stage trail at top speed. There was no chance for talk with the thundering hoofs of two huge stallions going at terrific pace.

The stage was due. At any moment it might come into view with a dead man tied to the seat and emptiness where gold-bearing sacks should have been. Those killers, the Lone Ranger knew, fired from ambush, and fired to kill. They took no

chances. Giles Larkin, dead-shot and courageous would have no chance against the guns of the hirelings of Judge Masters.

If only he could reach the stage, the hard-riding masked rider thought, before the attack, and capture a couple of the outlaw band. Force them to reveal the secrets that he'd failed to learn. Let Tonto get from them a map of the cavern and the tunnels, and their hiding-place of the stolen gold.

Tonto, riding slightly behind the Lone Ranger, was the first to sight the stage. It was an almost invisible speck in the distance. He shouted, and the masked man saw it, too.

It was coming toward them. In a moment it became distinctly visible, and the steady gait of the six horses told both masked man; and Indian that a man controlled the reins. They were not running rampant and unguided. So far, the stage was safe.

Then things began to happen. Little puffs of white showed at the sides of the trail. The stage was being attacked, and the Lone Ranger was still a half-mile away. The shots had been sent from ambush. Shots that couldn't fail to drop Giles Larkin.

LARKIN, the giant District Manager, was no fool. When he started out to take the stage-coach load of gold from the west to the Forks, he refused to take a guard with him. For this, he was called several kinds of an addle-headed, cocksure, over-grown fool, by Windy Rhodes, the Manager of the mountain division of the line, but Larkin had a plan in mind.

"When he was a few miles out of town, he stopped the stage and drew things from his bag. A suit of clothes and rope and string. He stuffed clothes with weeds, then tied them to the driver's seat. He fixed his hat on top of the dummy, and ran the reins to the inside of the stage.

He grinned as he surveyed the crude replica of himself. "Tain't flatterin'" he

muttered, "but maybe it'll do." Then he climbed inside and started east. "Hope the crooks don't disappoint me now, after all the trouble I've gone to. I'll sure welcome the chance tuh give 'em a rousin' reception."

His disappointment grew as he came nearer to the Forks with nothing happening. Then without warning, two shots rang from alongside the trail. The dummy on the seat jumped twice.

Giles let out a war whoop of savage joy. His gun was ready and he'd seen the outlaws the instant they fired.

"Yuh damned killers," he bellowed. He dropped the reins, and let loose with his six-gun. It barked and jumped four times, but twice would have been plenty,

"Take them," screamed Giles, "fer the boys yuh drilled!" Beyond the fringe of weeds beside the trail, he saw a third man leaping to the saddle. Twice more his gun blasted winged death, and the outlaw reeled in the saddle, swinging dizzily over one side. One foot was caught in the stirrup and the racing horse dragged him a hundred feet or so before he finally came loose and lay still on the ground.

"That makes three of yuh," shouted Larkin. He held a fresh gun in his hand, and leaped from the still moving stage. The horses went on, but Giles remained, looking hopefully around him for another man to shoot at.

He was frankly disappointed when he saw no other men in ambush. "Wal," he muttered, "I got three of 'em. That ain't a bad day's huntin'," He forgot the stage, in his inspection of the two who were dead beside the trail. Both men were known to Giles as notorious killers, wanted by the law. He was not conscious of the fact that the stage had returned to him. When he turned and saw it there, with an Indian and a masked man sitting on white horses, his big mouth dropped open in surprise.

"It is too bad you killed them," a level voice said. "I tried to get to you in time to tell you not to."

"An' who the—"

"Steady. I'm not one of the gang. I've escaped from their headquarters."

"Yere?"

"You can understand that if I wanted to steal the gold, I could have simply kept on with the stage, instead of bringing it back."

Giles nodded his big head slowly. This calm man with the level voice was a new type to him. Frankl admiration for both the white horses showed in Larkin's face.

IT TOOK some time-and quite a bit of patience to make Giles understand just what was wanted. Men, and arms, and lots of lanterns, to go to Catamount Cavern and clean out the place.

Finally the big man said, "Yuh: mean, stranger, that you can show; me the way there?"

"Yes."

"Yuh mean it's likely we'll find all the stolen gold there? That we'll get the rest of the skunks. that're in the gang?"

The masked man nodded. Then he went on to explain the scheme for building a refinery, and finished by telling of Judge Masters' part.

This, at first, was unbelievable to Giles.

"Who else would have been able to do it all?" argued the Lone Ranger. "I'd be the first one to cheer if Masters were not guilty, ;but who else would be likely to. have the names of all those killers .and means of reaching them?"

Giles went to the side of Silver and stuck his big hand up. "Pard," he said, "yuh got me convinced. I'll get Bob Burton an' every man in town that c'n tote a gun. We'll take that .place by storm,"

"Not until tonight. The men are .out during the day. We want to be sure they all are there when we attack."



"Meantime, they's a chance the Judge'll show his face in town," agreed Giles. "If he does, we can nail him there—but, anyhow, tonight it is!"

A meeting place in Catamount Valley was decided on. The masked rider was ready to go, but Giles held him for a moment more. "One thing, Mister."

"Yes?"

"You're masked, yuh tote two guns, an' yuh talk sort o' different than what others do. Lemme ask yuh ... is yer hoss called Silver?"

The masked man nodded.

"An' the Injun's name is Tonto?"

"It is."

"I thought so," exclaimed the big stage driver. "I thought so,, by darn. I'll be seein' you tonight Lone Ranger!"

On the trail back to town, the Lone Ranger rode silently for miles beside his Indian companion. The town was just ahead of them when the Lone Ranger spoke. "Tonto, I'm going to leave you here."

Surprise showed in the Indian's face.

"You know where the meeting place is to be. Go there at the appointed time, and I will meet you. There is one person I want to be sure will be on hand."

Tonto muttered something in his native tongue, and solemly watched the tall rider as he cut south from the trail to disappear in a distant clump of cottonwoods.

CHAPTER XI.

Attack

THERE was no moon to break the blackness of the night. Old Catamount rose gradually from the small group of men who sat impudently on clumping horses. Cigarettes' glowed like' giant fireflies. From time to time, a match would flare; and some member of the group would look at his watch and murmur, "He's late an' gettin' later."

Each man was armed to the teeth with guns and rifles. Many of them carried a knife, and on Larkin's instructions, most of the men had lanterns. But these were not lighted—they were for use when the Cavern was entered.

"I move we don't wait no longer," growled a deep bass voice. "Let's get goin'."

A guttural voice broke from the dark, "Him come plenty soon. You wait-um."

"I don't like takin' orders from an Injun."

"If we ain't startin' soon, I'm goin' back tuh home,"

Each of the men was anxious to get into action. They had fired themselves for battle with the killer band, and this long wait was rankling to them. "Git all mad an' then sit around till we git all ca'med down. That ain't no way tuh do!"

It was Lige Cooley who spoke. He thrilled at being on the manhunt with his big friend, Giles.

"The pack of yuh, shut up." There was authority in that booming voice. It was Giles Larkin, who had taken matters out of Sheriff Burton's hands. The Sheriff was there, but Giles was master of the men. "What's more," he growled, "toss away them smokes. Yuh want the skunks to see us a mile off?"

"When Giles spoke, men obeyed. The cigarettes went out and grumbling ceased.

Old Lige chuckled. "Larkin ain't kilt but three men today, gents, an' he's hankerin'

fer more tuh make an even half-dozen. 'Tain't wise tuh cross him."

"Let me at that pack in the cave an' I'll make it a dozen," rumbled Giles. "Unless I run out o' subjects."

"Someone's comin' now," shouted a voice.

A white horse stood out against the dark, forbidding background of Old Catamount. The Lone Ranger came, but he was not alone. There was another horse behind him, and a slim rider whose long hair, was tucked beneath a man's stetson.

"I brought Peggy Masters with me," stated the masked man. "If you're ready, follow me."

He didn't break the pace of Silver, but continued on his way. The men hauled their horses around to follow the white stallion, and Tonto ranged alongside.

"Stay close to the girl, Tonto, don't let her get into the fighting; Keep her with us."

"This not place for girl. What for you fetch-um her?"

"I think we might need her before we're through."

Peggy was right behind the two "If," she said, "you'd let me have a gun, I think I could give a good account of myself."

"Not a chance," growled Larkin. "This ain't no place fer yuh."

"We may need her, Larkin."

"All right, Lone Ranger, if you say so, but she's got tuh keep hid an' outen the firen'. Fact is, the' lot of you better stay back when I get goin' at that pack of thieving snakes. When I open fire I don't fool around, an' I aim tuh open fire an' spray plenty lead before this night is done."

Lige Cooley chuckled. He whispered to the girl, "He's my pard, Miss Peggy. Ain't he swell!" Pride filled the old man's voice. "He c'n outcuss any man I ever seen."

"Quiet," snapped the Lone Ranger. "From now on, no more talking.

Follow me, and when I lift my hand, halt and dismount,"

There came a couple of grumbles of resentment at his manner, but these were halted by Giles Larkin's deep voice. "Any man that don't like it, can deal with me.

There were no further dissenting growls. For half an hour the grim band made its way ahead. Stars gave a meagre light, but aside from the blur of the leader's horse, the men were merely shadows, slightly darker than the face of Old Catamount.

Then, at the signal, each man dismounted. There was a little clanking of lanterns as these were unhooked from the saddle horns. No words were spoken.

Ahead, a hundred yards or more, a faint yellow glow broke the solid wall of blackness. It was hardly visible and almost entirely screened by stunted trees and tangled weeds.

The men formed a compact body as they pressed close to the masked leader and heard his whispered instructions.

"There are probably guards out, side the entrance of the cave. Larkin and I will go ahead, The rest of you come single file. Each man watch the man in front of him. When we have disposed of the guards, we'll attack the men inside. Ready!"

There were several clicks as men made sure their guns were working freely, then with big Giles at his side, the Lone Ranger went toward the entrance of the cavern,

THERE was a note of discord among the outlaws in the cave. Four of their number were dead, victims of their own gun-craziness when they had blasted at each other in the torture chamber, trying to drop the Lone Ranger. Half a dozen others lay beneath their blankets with wounds and broken bones.

Several men limped as they moved about the cave. Among these were the two who had been assigned the task of guarding

Peggy. They were a badly battered bunch of men. Those who had escaped physical injury, were mentally downcast with the recent news that had been received.

"Three of 'em killed," growled Batdorf, "an' even then, they didn't get the gold. We ain't had nothin' but bad breaks since that masked man came here."

"If ever I get him," snarled Breed, "I'll wring his neck with these here bare hands of mine." He clenched huge, powerful fists until the knuckles whitened.

"Tuh top it all" commented another outlaw, "Blinky's in a bad mood because the girl escaped. He was tellin' me that the Judge himself is ready tuh punish the pack of us fer permittin' that same."

"What's he expect?" asked someone. "How was we to fight against that white hoss That crittur is a killer." There was no card playing in the cavern that night. No jokes were told. The men were sullen and morose over the treatment they'd had at the hands of Blinky.

"On orders of the Boss," the pock-marked man had told them.

"If I could get the Lone Ranger," repeated Breed, "I'd ..." He broke off at a sound from outside. "What was that!"

The men looked toward the entrance. "Sounded like a twig snappin' or something" one of them commented. "I guess one of the guards maybe stepped on a hunk of dead branch."

"I heard it again," Breed's voice was apprehensive. "I'm goin' to find out what's goin' on out there. ... If someone knocked the guards out. ..."

Breed never finished that speech. He was cut off by a shout of frenzy from a man near the door. "Look!" he screamed.

"The Lone Ranger!" yelled Batdorf.

The tall form of the **Lone Ranger** was inside the cavern. Each hand held a heavy gun. Giles Larkin was close behind the masked man. He, too, held a

brace of heavy six-guns, but he let them do his talking for him. His first shot slammed Batdorf off his feet as he was reaching for his gun.

THAT started things. The outlaws went for their guns and a dozen shots were fired, almost as one. The tall hat was spun off Larkin's head. The Lone Ranger, quick as a panther, leaped to one side, ducking low.

The other men were pouring lead into the furthest corners of the cavern as they piled through the doorway. Burton accounted for three before he went down with a bullet in his leg.

Giles Larkin made an easy target. He took two slugs in the shoulder, but didn't even notice them till later.

Bob Burton was firing from the floor; firing slowly, with deadly accuracy.

Even old Lige took part in the combat, hopping up and down, "To make him hard to hit," he afterward explained. Then, seeing men beneath the blankets, he used his six-gun as a club, and went methodically about a self-appointed task of putting them to sleep. "Tuh pervent pot shots after they'd surrendered."

Less than five minutes after the masked man had appeared in the opening, the fight was over. Six men threw down their weapons. They were quickly roped and tied. The rest were dead, or out of the fight, with one exception.

Breed, feigning death, was lying in one of the dark corners of the cavern. His eyes were red with hatred as he watched the Lone Ranger. Slowly he hauled out his weapon.

His lips curled back and showed his dirty, yellow, fang-like teeth, as he took careful aim at the broad back of the man behind the mask. Then, from the doorway, came a wild yell. The brawny arm of Tonto whipped forward from over his head. Light flashed through the air and a knife speared



the wrist that held the gun. Tonto followed the knife and smashed his fist full against the big man's mouth. The crack of the impact was like an explosion. Breed's head snapped back. His eyes closed, he groaned, and lay still.

;; "Now tie-um him," muttered the Indian.

Peggy was inside the cave, wide-eyed, at the scene of battle. For a moment, she reeled dizzily, then regained her composure. Her lips became thin as she clamped her mouth tightly, determined to carry through the duty the Lone Ranger had asked of her.

The tall man took her hand. 'Courage,' he breathed softly.

"I—I'll be all right," said the girl. She was a thoroughbred, "You needn't be afraid I'll faint. Are you going to look for my father now?"

"Yes," was the reply, "right now."

CHAPTER XII.

Conclusion

GILES LARKIN should have been out of the fighting with his wounds. The

big District Manager of the stage line had taken terrible punishment, yet he insisted on being one of the group that was to explore the tunnels to get at the root of this evil—Blinky, and the Boss.

Sheriff Bob Burton wanted to go, too, but he could barely stand on his injured leg, and finally had to be counted out. Lige wouldn't leave his partner, Giles. "May be needin' me tuh lean on," he argued, "what with them bullets in yer shoulder." Larkin grinned at the old man's spunk. The thought of that frail old-timer supporting his huge bulk amused him.

Lanterns were lighted, guns re-loaded, and six men were ready to start for the depths of Old Catamount. Each man held two lanterns. The plan was to leave lights behind them as they followed the twists and turns, to mark the way out when they left.

There were six of the openings, each one leading into unknown depths. "We'll go first, to the place where I saw Wilson and talked to the Boss," announced the masked Man. "That's the most likely place to find the rest of the gang."

He started forward, Peggy close behind him at the side of Tonto. The others came in single file. Tonto held a light high over his head as they began the slow descent down the tunnel where Blinky had lead the way two nights before.

The Lone Ranger was watching the walls closely.

Before the first turn, he saw a small depression in the rock. THERE, he knew, was where he'd jabbed with his clasp-knife. If the other blazes were as easily seen, there would be no trouble in finding the torture chamber. He hardly dared to hope he'd find the leaders there. They surely would have learned of the attack by this time.

Perhaps they'd fled by some other means — this thought disturbed him. He'd considered it a possibility when planning the attack, but reasoned that if such an escape



had been possible, he would not have been allowed the freedom of the tunnels. No, he was dead sure there was no exit, save that which was guarded—the Cavern itself.

Here was a place where the tunnel seemed to go slightly to the left, but he remembered that Blinky had made a sharp turn to -the right, to-take another tunnel.

He made the turn, watching the wall closely. Another knife on the rock indicated a turn to the left. He looked back, saw that one of the men had left a lantern at the turn, and then went on.

The tunnel was going downward more steeply now. The sides were more irregular and there were several turns, but each was clearly noted by the knife jabs. He murmured a prayer that he'd made no mistake in bringing Peggy here. If his deductions were correct, the girl's presence would be the means of clearing up the mystery. From time to time, as they progressed, the men left lanterns. This time there would be no chance of getting lost.

They'd follow the tunnel to its end, then try and check the by-paths. It was quite possible that the leaders would remain hidden, preferring death to capture.

After a slow curve to the left the Lone Ranger saw a tunnel on his left. It was here that he had gone off the course the night before, when he was lugging the dead body of Tex Wilson. Another couple of minutes and he saw ahead, the dead end of the tunnel "Almost there," he breathed, thinking of the three-foot opening into the torture chamber, and the second level, where the Boss had been.

He raised his hand in a prearranged signal, and the men went on, cautious to move as softly as only true westerners can move.

Lights were shielded behind the men's bodies, and the masked man crouched and peered through the opening. It was dark inside. He whispered to Tonto, and went on. Other men, careful not to let a light fall on them, slid through behind the masked man, and straightened on the other side with guns drawn.

Tonto finally passed a lantern through the hole. Six men were ready to prevent a sudden attack. The sight that met the men was weird. In the center of the chamber, two, bodies sprawled upon the floor.

There was no question about their condition. The knives, whose handles showed, were imbedded deep in both men's hearts.

This was not the most amazing part. A tall, dark form was standing over the dead bodies. White hair fell from beneath a tall, dark hat. A long, black coat was wrapped around the figure. The yellow lamplight made deep shadows on the thin face of Judge Masters.

He stood, arms folded across his chest, head back, chin tip, proudly erect, looking directly at the men who stared, with

the same haughty bearing he'd used so often on the bench in court.

Giles Larkin sputtered incoherently in his rage. Lige and the others, for the space of a full moment, could only stare dumfounded at the cool defiance of the Judge. Finally, the Jurist spoke. "I surrender to you," he said. "Are you going to shoot me here or take me with you?"

His voice was well-controlled, "But the Lone Ranger detected the lightest tremor in it. "Where is Blinky!" he asked.

"I—I don't know." Obviously the man was lying.

"Judge Masters," the Lone Ranger spoke, with a soft voice, one that was a trifle kindly—sympathetic. "Why did you do it?"

"Kill and rob?"

"That is what I mean."

"I have nothing to say. I stand convicted, and ready to take whatever punishment your community demands."

The tortured cry of a woman broke in. "I won't—I can't believe it of you."

The Judge's eyes went wide; Peggy snatched herself from Tonto's grasp, and was through the opening racing toward her father. "Father, you didn't, you couldn't have done all these things—I won't—I can't believe it!"

, From near the ceiling, flame stabbed down, a gun roared, and at its flash, the Lone Ranger drew and fired. His gun jumped twice and the blasts rocked the walls.

Dumfounded men could only gasp at the speed of the shooting. Before the echoes died away, they realized the miracle of speed the masked man had shown them. The second of the masked man's shots was followed by a high-pitched scream and a man's form hurtled from the ceiling, landing with a thud on the rocky floor.

The Lone Ranger was barking commands. Watch that man — that's

Blinky! He's not killed. Don't let him get up! **Keep him covered."**

"I'll keep a watch on him," howled Lige, eager to have a part in this affair. Judge Masters was slumped on the floor. Peggy, frantically sobbing now, was holding the fine, aristocratic head, in her lap, pressing a tiny handkerchief against a wound.

"I'm not badly hurt, my dear," the Judge was saying. "Stunned, for a moment, that is all."

The Lone Ranger saw that the wound was a superficial one, but suggested that the elderly man remain as he was for a few moments, "Meanwhile," he said, "You can tell the truth."

"Heaven be praised, I can tell the truth now. My daughter is safe."

"One moment." The masked man looked toward the still unconscious Blinky. Tonto made a sign that he was not seriously wounded.

"Talk," commanded Giles Larkin.

THE Judge took a deep breath, and began. "First of all, you must understand that everything I did was simply to protect the life of my daughter. I knew these fiends held her captive. Each day I was taken where I could hear her voice, beyond a wall. I knew that she still lived. I dared not disobey the leader's slightest wish for fear the next day would be her last.

The outlaws wanted the use of my name and character to carry out their plans. They wanted to get gold, lots of it, through robberies, and bring it here. I was to arrange for the construction of a refinery as I told you,"

The Jurist looked at Larkin and paused. Giles nodded.

"They were going to use the refinery to make folks think the gold was mined and taken from this mountain by a secret process. That; would remove the risk of being suspected as the thieves.



It was the leader of this gang, who wrote me in the East and suggested that I come here. I —" he paused and glanced at his daughter. "I didn't tell you, Peggy, that this cave was my destination, because I wasn't sure I'd enter into the scheme of helping to finance a gold mine. I wanted to investigate it first. I—I didn't know, then, that it was all part of a crooked game on a gigantic scale."

"I understand, father. Go on." The Lone Ranger interrupted. "Who was the leader?"

"He called himself Blinky. He made all the men think he was merely a lieutenant in the band, but he was, in reality, the leader. He made me go to town after you escaped from here the other night. I had to tell certain parts of my plan for building a refinery, and had to complain about my jaw being hurt. This was to cast all suspicion on me. The leader knew the end was near when he found out that the man he thought was Fenner, was the Lone Ranger."

Tonto, closely watching Blinky, grinned appreciation at this. Larkin nodded his agreement.

The Judge smiled feebly, and went on. "I didn't know until a moment ago that you were safe," he said to Peggy. "Not until I heard you. Blinky was on the upper level, watching and listening when you were coming through the tunnels. He made me stand here and take the blame for everything. I wasn't sure he'd keep his word and release you after I was captured. but I was certain he would kill you if I didn't."

The Lone Ranger asked another Question. One that was in the minds of all the men. "Who, is Blinky?"

Judge Masters shook his head slowly. "No one knows. He must have spies all over town. There's hardly anything goes on he doesn't learn of. He would have known if I'd disobeyed him when I went to the Forks. He knows everything."

A GROAN told of Blinky's returning consciousness. He was awake, after the stunning fall from the top of the ladder in the corner. The Lone Ranger helped him to his feet.

"We'll find out more about him right away," he muttered. He looked into the pock-marked face, with its hatred shining out of deep-set eyes, "You are standing erect, Blinky. Did you forget that you were a cripple?"

The man shrilled a curse, and then a strange thing took place. The side of his shirt broke out, the side where the empty sleeve had dangled. An arm flashed up, where no arm was supposed to be. A knife glittered in the lantern's light.

Blinky moved fast, but Tonto was faster. His brown hand grabbed the wrist in a bone-crushing grip. Blinky screamed in pain as the Indian bent back and downward on the hairy arm of the outlaw leader. The



fingers opened slowly, and the knife clattered to the floor.

"I almost had you," screamed the man. "I got Tex Wilson that way, too. I almost had you. I'll get you yet—I'll get you all, you and the Judge, and the girl. Damn you all—I'll get you."

His mouth was drooling in his fury. The man was insane with rage at being finally captured, despite all his cunning, all his careful planning.

A huge bulk pushed forward, "I can't stand no more," roared Giles. He brought his great fist up from the hip and landed it on Blinky's chin. A smack, and the evil head bobbed up. Oblivion for the second time swallowed the man with the pock-marked face. He slumped down, as Tonto loosed his grip.

Old Lige, grinned at Larkin and added a coup de grace with his gun butt.

"Humph," snorted Giles. "You don't crack hard enough tuh hurt a sand-flea."

"I want him tuh live so I kin see him swing," apologized old Cooley. .

"Wipe his face," suggested the masked man, "and we'll see the man beneath that theatrical stuff."

The others stared.

Lige was scrubbing at Blinky's face with his bandanna. "This stuff comes off," he bawled. It was true, the make-up on the outlaw's face was coming off. The ugly scar was disappearing, the pock-marks were being erased.

"The man I have in mind was: once an actor," the Lone Ranger explained. "He could speak in a voice like the Judge used, he could speak in his own voice, and he could use the shrill voice of Blinky. He saw you yesterday, Judge Masters, while you were in the café. He watched every move you made."

The Judge was on his feet, looking closely at the face of the unconscious man.

"If this don't beat all," Lige howled. There, before the staring men was the man who tended bar at the Forks Cafe—Lefty Slocum!

LIGE COOLEY and Giles were disgusted with the way the trials of the dozen surviving outlaws went. It took almost a week to find Slocum and his gang guilty, and get them hanged, but hang they did. Judge Masters was restored to the bench, in the informal "Western way," to preside. He regained the good-will he'd lost years ago, by accepting no other verdict than a hanging one.

The outlaws died without revealing the cache of stolen gold. This was for the time forgotten in the excitement of splitting reward money that poured in for each of the outlaw's capture.

Fenner was given proper burial and his property held for whoever came to claim it. Then Giles Larkin organized a party to search through the various tunnels for the gold.

Finally, it was located far back in one of the tunnels, and brought out to be sent to the owners.

But these things were no concern of the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Their work

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ended when the criminal band was smashed. In the darkness, after the last of the outlaws was taken from the cave, the two had drawn to one side of the jubilant party.

Their two white horses stood side by side beneath the clear sky and bright stars.

Peggy, and her father, were riding behind the others, happy with each other. The masked man looked at the retreating shadows. "They don't need us any more, Tonto," he murmured to his friend.

Tonto shook his head. The two men of the West, masked man and Indian, turned their horses and moved on. The two white forms were swallowed by the darkness and Catamount Cave was quiet, dark and deserted. From somewhere in the night, a distant voice rang out, to echo from Old Catamount, "Heigh-Yo, Silver!"